

The Fen-Queen's Bride

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Marta's favorite version of the story went:

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One spring day the good young girl went to the well in the forest. There she met another old woman, far more frail and feeble than her mother. The woman asked her for a drink of water. The girl replied, "Of course, old mother," and dipped the bucket for her. After quenching her thirst the woman said, "You are so kind and sweet and beautiful that I will bless you for it. Each time you open your mouth, a lovely flower or a precious stone will drop from it." And it happened, for the woman was a fairy.

The girl ran home to tell her mother and sister. Soon knee-deep in emeralds and roses, they believed her. The miserly termagant of a mother chased the elder girl into the forest to seek her fortune, too. The old woman was still at the well, and she asked the elder girl for a drink. But the willful girl said, "I certainly will not fetch water for someone who has nothing better to do than sit on wells! Don't you have a home to go to?"

The old woman stamped her foot and said, "Oh! You are so mean and stubborn and ugly that I will curse you for it. Each time you open your mouth, a horrible insect or an ugly swamp creature will drop from it." And it happened.

The girl ran home, weeping foul creatures. The shock killed her mother dead. Then a prince rode by and spoke to the younger sister, who was also very beautiful. When she answered kindly, and in gems, he determined right then and there to marry her as a present to himself (her sweetness) and his kingdom (the gems). They lived happily ever after.

Driven mad by her curse, the elder girl ran away to a corner of the forest and died all alone. And since she was always so ugly and quarrelsome, no one missed her.

Marta tried not to laugh whenever a passing gypsy or peddler traded that story for a bit of bread. Laughter made eels drip from her mouth, which made the gypsy or the peddler vomit up the bread and run away, wasting not only the story but the food as well.

"Please come." A small diamond fell to the floor from Bettina's mouth. Over the years Marta had learned that diamonds meant worry. This diamond had a green

streak shot through the middle: worry tinged with guilt.

"I'd really rather not," Marta answered, keeping her feelings as smooth as her voice, as smooth as the dough she kneaded. Without feeling behind the words, no toad fell from her lips; no snake writhed to the floor.

"But you are so very entertaining," the Princess implored in sapphires. A snort of beetles escaped Marta. She'd intended to say, "Oh, yes, I'm very amusing, especially when I tell a joke and the feast ends in screaming because of the cockroaches," but she supposed she'd made her point.

"How are you getting along?" Marta changed the subject with only a lazy blue fly.

The Princess watched her silk-slipped toe grind a perfectly round little dent in the packed-earth floor. "Fine."

"Do you think your prince still loves money more than you?" Marta asked. Royal eyebrows flickered, and Marta sighed a sympathetic small white moth. Princess Bettina shrugged, holding out a silk envelope.

"If you change your mind," she said without gilding. She, too, knew the trick of feeling nothing. She was a princess by marriage.

Marta laid the invitation on the table. "Thanks." She waited until Bettina was safely in her carriage and gone down the muddy lane before scooping the gems out of their circle of beetle admirers on the floor. The beetles especially, of all her "children," stayed closest by her. On some days this comforted her. She did not know if those days were good or bad.

Marta scattered the gems, all but the diamond, in the grass outside the door. Held up to the light, the diamond showered ruby and amethyst rainbows over the hut's dank walls. If Bettina only visited more often, Marta could hang strings of diamonds over the window, filling the hovel with light like dew. Instead, the little stone would keep her in fish and leeks for several months. The deaf fishwife overcharged her, but did not make her speak.

She picked up Bettina's lute and sat down in the sun-filled doorway. The curse had not taken away her warm, low voice; it had embellished it with trills of peeping frogs and glissandos of water bugs. The lute only played music, not creatures. She wondered; if she found another silly girl, might she give the curse to her and be free of it herself?

Marta stretched and warmed her hands through a few exercises. Bettina had

given up the lute early. Practicing raised callouses on her delicate fingertips. Mother worried about her "stuck-up ways," but Tina only giggled and danced down the front path in the sunlight, twirling and whirling her skirts around her slender legs and filling her blonde hair with sparkles, practicing for the day when a Prince chanced by.

Marta struck a wooden note and paused to chew a fingernail short. Why hadn't the fairy thought Tina's beauty and disposition draw enough for any man, even a Prince? Why gild her with jeweled anger and coins for tears?

She watched the other half of the thought rumble down the road of her mind toward her, and sighed that she was still so petty. The thought arrived with all the force and pain with which it had hit her the first time: why, then, give me vermin when I speak? Am I not plain enough that no one will ever want to touch me?

Marta sighed: another moth. No old woman, but a fairy lady in disguise, had asked Tina for water. Tina refused only for the sake of the new dress she wore, stitched by her old mother from cloth bought by her sister's days of labor at the weaver's. In her kindness, Tina offered to fetch that sister, who was much bigger and stronger than she, and not dressed in her finest. Charmed by so lovely a damsel with such manners, the Lady "blessed" her. Simple as a fairy tale.

But after a day of scrubbing the hearth clean of soot, mending the thatched roof, and pulling stumps out of the pasture with stubborn old Blue, the last thing Marta wanted to do was put herself out for a perfectly strong and capable woman who sat on the well's edge sneering at her.

Marta closed her eyes to remember. A furrow sank into her forehead. Had she failed to listen to the little voice inside her that had said not to go, or had there been no voice? She didn't know, any more. She did know that, at the well, she'd seen through the Lady's disguise. She hadn't known she could do such things until then. Somehow, though, she'd missed seeing the Lady's magic. Marta had put her foot down, crossed her arms, and told the Lady that, being young and strong herself, she could very well fetch her own water.

The Lady's laugh shivered Marta to the bone. The Lady's tongue snaked out of her mouth and fell to the dusty earth. Bettina shrieked and ran home, trailing lilies. The Lady rose: Marta thought she meant to follow Tina and stepped between them. But the Lady reached out a hand and grabbed Marta by the jaw. And kissed her.



Marta shoved her away with a cry: shoved away her musky breath and honeyed lips, her flower-stem body, her skin too damp and cool in the summer sun. Wiping her mouth, Marta saw a beautiful little frog fall to earth to be devoured by the Lady's tongue, which was now a snake.

"So shall I have you," a voice whispered in her head. But Marta stood alone at the well, and the frog had been poison. The feel of the Lady's kiss had not wiped off; not that day nor through the many sleepless nights to follow. The memory -- the promise in the kiss that even she might be wanted -- was the thing most keeping her from enjoying her solitude now.

As in the tale, her mother died shortly after that, but from age, not shock. The Prince had Tina, or Tina had her Prince; either way she was gone. Left with a never-ending supply of frogs and bugs, Marta left the dry pastures and forests of her childhood for the little hut in the swamp, the better to give her creatures a good home. She might suffer for them, but she could not harden her heart enough to make them suffer for her.

And all for the lack of a drink of water.

Strumming the lute in the autumn light, for the first time Marta wondered if she'd been wrong.

Instantly, tongues of wind hissed. Sedges whipped around to jab their needle-heads at her. The sun shuttered behind clouds, dark and light, then snuffed out to leave the marsh glowing brown. The spongy ground under the heath shivered with laughter.

The Lady.

Marta scrambled into the hut to slam the door shut but the wind knocked her back across the table, broke the door against the wall and swirled in the center of the room. The wind swayed toward her and bent over her. Marta screamed spiders and hid her face in her hands.

A breath of fog caressed her cheek. Marta flinched away, only to be embraced -- trapped -- everything whirled together into the sensation of being held. A face of sharp eyebrows, glittering marshwater eyes, and serpentine smile filled her sight. The Lady leaned over her, her body cool as the swamp at twilight against Marta's blushing heat. Breath without taste passed over her mouth and sent a

burning coal into the darkest, deepest part of her. "You let me in," the Lady whispered in her mind. Hands found all her flesh; not one bit was safe from them. "You finally let me in."

Marta opened her mouth to speak beetles, but the Lady's kiss filled it. The coal flared; the arms strengthened to hold her up.

"You will be my bride," the Lady's voice said in Marta's head, through the swirl of emotion her hands sent through her body. "And I will be your Lady." Marta prayed into the kiss deepening in her mouth -- "yes" -- and embraced the Lady in return before the small voice in her head could say "wait."

The cottage and the swamp and the world melted away into soft, almost-lit darkness. In the Lady's arms Marta closed her eyes. She moaned, waiting for the kiss; she moaned under the kiss; neither sound, nor any other that night, produced anything but themselves.

She did not realize this until after she woke.

The pure light of an ordinary spring afternoon filled her; she felt it sieve from her face and filter from her mind, from her eyes that had been blind. The sky, the spongy earth beneath her body, the blades of grasses and the distant trees: everything she saw or felt or knew existed, even herself, filled itself with the light.

Her skin -- the plushness of it -- her blood, even her bones, buzzed with being filled, fulfilled, touched. Finally she knew what it was to want to fight to live. She wondered if Tina felt that for her prince, and knew immediately that she did not. Marta almost wept.

But the thrill faded, leaving her aching to be touched again. Her heart throbbed with anticipation, but it bled from a wound delivered by her own hand. Never again would she feel that totality of existence. Never again would she be touched. Never, wanted. Now she did weep.



Then the marsh wriggled, coming to her in waves. Her children. They crawled and leaped and flew to her; she held her arms out to them, wanting to embrace them all.

But it was not enough. The air seemed empty of birds, the water empty of frogs and snakes and insects, the ground empty of worms. By guarding her every word, by resisting the magic that happened when she spoke, she'd nearly starved the marsh of life. Her heart ached for the emptiness more than her skin hurt from lack of a touch. She said:

"Once upon a time a woman had two daughters all by herself, for she was a fairy woman and could do such things. The elder daughter was just like her mother: proud and powerful, able to see what it is that makes up a thing and, therefore, why it is beautiful. The younger watched them and loved them and could be proud and powerful like them but was afraid. It was so much easier to be silly and simpering and fit into the world of men."

Carrion birds and blackbirds and long-legged snipes slid, wet as from the egg, from Marta's mouth and flapped across the hut's earthen floor toward the light outside.

"One spring day the young girl went into the forest and met an old woman who was far more frail and feeble than her mother. Frail and feeble as she thought she, herself, was. The woman, who was also a fairy but in disguise, asked the girl to fetch her some water from the deep, cool well on which she was sitting. In the men's world, where the girl wanted to fit, mildness and obedience are virtues, so the girl replied, 'Of course, old mother,' and dipped the bucket in for the water. The fairy quenched her thirst and said, 'You are such a simpering, silly little fool that I will make it worse for you. Each time you open your mouth, a flower or a jewel will drop from it. You will never be loved just for yourself.'"

Dried, the birds flew away, leaving room in Marta's mouth for snakes and toads and the bugs that live only under water. They poured from her as her heart filled with her story.

"The girl ran home crying to her mother and sister. Soon, the three were knee-deep in emeralds and roses. The mother wept for what her child, who had pride and power just waiting inside her, had let another make of her. The elder daughter, who loved her mother and sister very much, raced into the forest for vengeance. She saw through the fairy's disguise: saw the wicked smile flicker about her lips and eyes; the curling brown hair wriggling over her exposed breasts, the thin and silken robe clinging to her skin like running water. But she knocked the fairy off the well anyway, saying, 'Do you have nothing better to do than curse poor young girls? How much of a coward are you?' The fairy grinned wickedly and for an instant -- just one instant -- the elder daughter knew uncertainty. It was enough."

But the stream of toads and salamanders and beautiful dragonflies knew no interruption. Marta's uncertainty was a thing of the past now, of another life.

"The fairy said, 'You are a bitch after my own heart. Come with me and be my bride. Give yourself to me and over to me. I will care for you as I do for everything that belongs to me. Or I will curse you so that you wish you died of it.'"

Marta laughed as she had laughed then, full and round and warm from her belly. And the worms came: worms to make the fen strong and healthy, worms to feed the birds, worms to feed on the birds when they died. Worms tumbled down happily about her as she laughed on and on, cascaded down her neck and rolled off her white breasts. They piled up in great heaps about her feet and began burrowing in the soil of her cottage floor to spread themselves out through the earth.

"But the fairy did not laugh," Marta continued, wiping tears and beetles of mirth away. "The fairy bared her teeth in a vicious smile and said, 'Speak toads. Laugh worms. Cry beetles and sneeze mosquitoes, until you will be mine.' Then she vanished."

"The girl rushed home to find her mother dead of a cold iron sword in the heart, and Bettina in the arms of that sword's Prince. When he'd seen what happened when she cried, he'd decided to marry her as a present to his kingdom, rather than use and forget her as a present to himself. The girl, wanting to believe the glamour of being chosen, had not seen this. Her mother had seen it, of course, and tried to stop him, and had gotten the prince's sword in her heart for her care."

"So the young girl went off with her prince. The older girl grew older until one day the fairy woman came for her." Marta's body trembled. She closed her eyes for a moment, waiting for her skin's flush under the Lady's remembered touch to fade. "She had to wait for the girl to doubt herself, to doubt that what she'd done at the well was what she'd meant to do. What she'd wanted. As the Lady had known, sooner or later, under the curse of speaking toads and laughing snails, even one as proud and powerful as the old woman's daughter must doubt her choice. And, one day, she did."

Marta watched the lute gleam in the light in the doorway, where she'd dropped it what seemed like days ago, now. The time she'd spent . . .

"The Lady came for her in a whirlwind and took her away in a dream. There, finally, in the world beyond this world, the fairy woman's daughter knew what it was to be touched, held, embraced. She felt in her body what her sister felt in the stories of the world of men, and now she knew what it meant to want to live."

"But all the time she was there, nothing but words fell from her mouth. No snakes. No poison spiders. No shining black beetles to gleam in the sun. And the

lady . . ." Marta paused in her damselflies, trying to put a word to the feeling. "The Lady was a boor." One great, lazy toad plopped out. "The Lady told the girl stories to enchant her with how much power she had. But the power she truly had never equaled the stories, and the girl's own story interested her more. The Lady promised to teach the girl everything she wanted to know. But the girl already knew it, from inside herself, and began to miss making turtles and tadpoles with words. Finally, the Lady grew angry, and tried to trick her into eating fairy food. But the girl was the daughter of a fairy and knew that if she ate she'd have to stay in the Lady's land forever. And she missed her own fen."

Tears like diamonds fell upon the backs of the eels. "And the girl got away, uncharmed by the Lady's pointed attentions, unmoved by the Lady's oh-so-great power, uncaught by the rarity of the Lady's love and the honor of its gift to her. The girl . . ." Marta took a breath and closed her eyes. "I. I can see into the heart of a thing, and therefore into what makes it beautiful. In the Lady's heart is no beauty. Only wickedness. Desire for power over the strong. Desire to be the best without competition. So much desire to be great that no amount of accomplishment can ever equal it. The Lady is a fraud."

"And I escaped. I saw the truth of her and her world, and I escaped. I slipped her noose and got away. When I woke up I was outside my own house, in the fen of my making, and I still had my gift, which she thought a curse. And I'm so glad."

The word left her in spangled orange butterflies that circled Marta's head like a bride's veil. And Marta smiled at them and lifted her hands to them, giving them her fingers to play around and alight on.

A noise behind her shook the butterflies away. Marta turned to see Bettina watching her, weeping a little: happiness and sorrow. Bettina, like everything else Marta saw, was made of light, but a darkness clawed in Bettina's side.

"You are dying of that." She pointed. Bettina put her hand over it and nodded. "Your prince's love of money," Marta said to herself. Bettina looked away, out the window to the fen.

"I'm so unhappy," Bettina whispered in death-lilies. She folded up to fall; Marta scrambled to her in time to help her down.

"You tell it so well," Bettina said, looking blindly at her. "Our story. Why did you stop?"

"I don't know what happens next," Marta said. "I didn't die in a corner of the forest. You didn't live happily ever after. The rest of that story didn't happen." Shooing the last of the worms and toads and waterfleas out of her cottage, she put Bettina to bed in her own cot and lay on the rug on the floor beside her.

Through the night Bettina muttered, in her sleep, of heartbreak and betrayal. Marta gathered up the bitter purple blossoms and burnt them.



Some summer mornings Marta found Bettina wandering through the marsh, studying the plants and insects. Others, Bettina barely woke. Then Marta would tell her again of the fairy woman and how she'd tried to capture Marta's heart. Some days it made Tina laugh, and on others she only nodded, her eyes dark with remembering. One day she asked, "Why didn't she keep you?"

Marta grinned. "She tried. I was more than she was. I was more than she reckoned I was. I left her standing with only herself, and that will never be enough." Bettina nodded, her blue eyes dark with trying to understand something just beyond her.

"He cannot keep you, you know." Bettina's brow furrowed. That was the truth for which she sought, but it was yet unreal. She had not found it for herself.

On an autumn morning Tina found Marta in the tall grasses, speaking toads. She knelt beside her, holding a baby spotted toad between her thumb and forefinger and tickling its round yellow belly.

"What was I like? Before?" she asked Marta. Marta looked away, guilty that she thought she understood Tina's question.

"Before the prince. Before the old woman -- the Lady -- at the well. What was I like?"

Marta opened her mouth to answer, but Tina went on. "Was I kind and gentle? Was I happy? Did I love you and Mother, and was I grateful? Or did I deserve to be silly and frivolous and valued only for what comes out of my mouth?"

Marta watched the fall of amethysts and ambers, then lay back among the grasses to answer her in gnats. "You were all of that and more. You were happy, and you loved us, and we knew it. The Lady is evil. You never realized it was you who was cursed, did you?" Tina shook her head and let the toad go. "I have always been so sorry for you," Marta whispered.

Tina gave a big white poppy sigh. "Thank you. I'm glad you didn't hate me." Marta laughed at her silliness -- spotted bugs -- but Tina just stared across the marsh. "What do I do now?"

"What do you want to do?" Marta asked. Bettina took a while to answer, her smooth, pretty face made beautiful by lines of concentration.

"I want to be something. I want to be what I might have been, what I could have been, if I'd chosen differently that day. I want to be what I really am."

The light within Bettina flared before Marta's eyes and didn't diminish even after she'd stopped speaking daisies. Only a little of the darkness remained in her side, and that mellowed the light and made it more beautiful. Marta sat up and took Tina's hand.

"You can. You can be all of that," she said. The sisters smiled at each other.

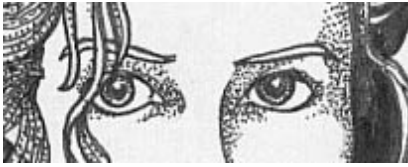
"Will you help me?" Tina asked.

Marta looked away, humbled. Of course I will, she wanted to answer. But a vision flashed: the Lady reclining in her throne of bones, laughing, happy to teach Marta everything she wanted to learn, for the small price of herself.

"I'll help if I can, but it's your road to walk," she said slowly. Bettina nodded. Marta hoped they both understood.

"Please come." Yet another spring day melted into the cottage. Another small diamond fell from Bettina's mouth.

"I'm far happier here," Marta smiled. Two frogs and a lotus plant left her. Her talents had grown over the years, but she coughed over the last of the roots.



"But I miss you," the Princess whispered in moonstones and aquamarines the color of tears. Marta wiped them off her fragile, wrinkled cheeks, then put the lotus in a jug of water.

"Your prince's love of money again?" Marta asked. The royal head nodded. Marta had no empathy, but a sigh of anger left her in wasps. Princess Bettina held out a silk envelope.

"If you change your mind," she said without gilding. Marta opened the envelope and took out the gilded invitation. Smiling at it, she picked up a branch of dried heath off the table and pressed it inside the invitation, and resealed the envelope with a kiss scented with rain and grass.

"If you change yours," she said, handing the envelope back with a hand that shook only a little. Bettina blinked back tears and smiled, gazing at the cottage where she'd grown up a little. Where she'd been happy.

"Maybe I will," she said in bright topazes. "Maybe someday I can learn to speak marshflowers instead of jewels, and spring breezes instead of gold."

The sisters embraced. "You can," Marta whispered, shooing the new green dragonfly away from her sister's hoard of silver hair.

Marta waited until Bettina was safely down the lane before scooping the gems and the beetles up. The beetles especially, of all her children, stayed the closest by her. She dumped them all gently outside; the beetles and frogs so enjoyed playing with Bettina's gems.



Standing in the sunlight eased the ache in her old bones a little. More, it let her feel a little of what she was: a part of the light that made up everything that was alive. Marta yawned: moss draped the trees that had long grown on the edges of her fen. She rubbed her nose a little, then sneezed. Bees puffed out and set off to dance in the first spring flowers. Fetching a bucket for fresh forest-well water, Marta followed the bees a while.

At the well she saw two girls: one lithe and simple, one tall and strong: laughing as sisters do together. She wondered if the girls had heard her story, if they believed the story that the world of men told them. If, in the gypsies' or peddlers' stories, Marta was still quarrelsome and prideful and ended badly in the corner of a forest, she didn't care. It was a tiny thing against the much larger thing of speaking the world of a fen into being.

Marta waited until the girls had gone, then fetched her own water.