

FAIRY TALE

By Gardner Dozois

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It wasn't a village, as is sometimes said these days, when we've forgotten just how small the old world was. In those days, long ago in a world now vanished with barely a trace left behind, a village was four or five houses and their outbuildings. A *large* village was maybe ten or fifteen houses at a crossroad, and perhaps an inn or *gasthaus*.

No, it was a town, even a moderately large one, on the banks of a sluggish brown river, the capital of a small province in a small country, lost and nearly forgotten—even then—in the immensity of the Central European steppes that stretch endlessly from the Barents Sea to the Black, and from the Urals to France. The nearest electric light was in Prague, hundreds of miles away. Even gaslighting was newfangled and marvelous here, although there were a few rich homes on the High Street that had it. Only the King and the Mayor and a few of the most prosperous merchants had indoor toilets.

The Romans had been here once, and as you followed the only road across the empty steppe toward town, you would pass the broken white marble pillars they had left behind them, as well as a vine-overgrown fane where, in another story, you might have ventured forth at night to view for yourself the strange lights that local legends say haunt the spot, and perhaps, your heart in your throat, glimpsed the misty shapes of ancient pagan gods as they flitted among the ruined columns...but this isn't that kind of story.

Further in, the road would cut across wide fields of wheat being worked by stooped-over peasants, bent double with their butts in the air, moving forward a step at a time with a sort of swaying, shuffling motion as they weeded, sweeping their arms back and forth over the ground like searching trunks, making them look like some strange herd of small double-trunked elephants, or those men who wear their heads below their navels. The bushes are decorated with crucified rabbits, tarry black blood matting their fur, teeth bared in death agony, a warning to their still-living brethren to stay away from the crops.

As the road fell down out of the fields and turned into the High Street of the town, you would see old peasant women, dressed all in black from head to foot, spilling buckets of water over the stone steps of the tall narrow houses on either side of the narrow street, and then scrubbing the steps with stiff-bristled brooms. Occasionally, as you passed, one or another of the old peasant women would straighten up and stare unwinkingly at you with opaque agate eyes, like a black and ancient bird.

At the foot of the High Street, you would see a castle looming above the river, small by the standards of more prosperous countries elsewhere in Europe, but large

enough to have dominated the tactical landscape in the days before gunpowder and cannon made all such places obsolete. It's a grim enough pile, and, in another story, cruel vampire lords would live there—but this isn't that kind of story either. Instead of vampires, the King lived there, or lived there for a few months each year, anyway, as he graciously moved his court from province to province, spreading the considerable financial burden of supporting it around.

He was what was called “a good King,” which meant that he didn't oppress the peasants any more than he was traditionally allowed to, and occasionally even distributed some small largess to them when he was able, on the ancient principle—sound husbandry—that you get more work out of your animals when they're moderately well-fed and therefore reasonably healthy. So he was a good King, or a good-enough King, at any rate. But in many a dimly-lit kitchen or bistro or backroom bar, the old men of the town huddled around their potbellied stoves at night and warmed their hands, or tried to, and muttered fearfully about what might happen when the Old King died, and his son and heir took over.

But as this isn't really a story of palace intrigue, either, or only partially so, you must move on to a large but somewhat shabby-genteel house on the very outskirts of town, the kind of neighborhood that will be swallowed by the expanding town and replaced by rows of worker's flats in thirty years or so. That girl there, sullenly and rather uselessly scrubbing down the flagstones in the small courtyard, is the one we're interested in.

For the kind of story this *is*, is a fairy-tale. Sort of.

There are some things they don't tell you, of course, even in the Grimm's version, let alone the Disney.

For one thing, no one ever called her “Cinderella,” although occasionally they called her much worse. Her name was Eleanor, an easy-enough name to use, and no one ever really paid enough attention to her to bother to come up with a nickname for her, even a cruel and taunting one. Most of the time, no one paid enough attention to even taunt her.

There *was* a step-mother, although whether she was evil or not depended on your point of view. These were hard times in a hard age, when even the relatively well-to-do lived not far from hunger and privation, and if she chose to take care of her own children first in preference to her dead husband's child, well, there were many who would not blame her for that. In fact, many would instead compliment her on her generosity in giving her husband's by-blow a place in her home and at her hearth when no law of Man or God required her to do so, or to lift a finger to insure the child's survival. Many *did* so compliment her, and the step-mother would lift her eyes piously to Heaven, and throw her hands in the air, and mutter modest demerrals.

For one of the things that they never tell you, a missing piece that helps make sense of the whole situation, is that Cinderella was a bastard. Yes, her father had doted on her, lavishing love and affection on her, had taken her into his house and raised her from a babe, but he had never married Eleanor's mother, who had died in childbirth, and he himself had died after marrying the Evil Step-Mother but *before* making a will that would have legally enforced some kind of legacy or endowment for his bastard daughter.

Today, of course, she would sue, and there'd be court-battles and DNA-testing, and appearances with lots of shouting on daytime talk-shows, and probably she would eventually win a slice of the pie. In those days, in that part of the world, she had no recourse under the law—or anywhere else, since the Church shunned those born in sin.

So the step-mother really *was* being quite generous in continuing to supply Eleanor's room and board rather than throwing her out of the house to freeze and starve in the street. That she didn't as well provide much in the way of warmth of familial affection, being icy and remote to Eleanor—the visible and undeniable evidence of her late husband's love for another woman—on those rare occasions when she deigned to notice her at all, is probably not surprising, and to really expect her to feel otherwise is perhaps more than could be asked. She had problems of her own, after all, and had already gone a long mile further than she needed to just by continuing to feed the child in the first place.

There were step-sisters too, children of a previous marriage (a marriage where the husband had *also* died young...but before you're tempted to cast the step-mother in a Black Widow scenario, keep in mind that in those days, in that place, dying young was not an especially rare phenomenon), but they were not particularly evil either—although they didn't much like Eleanor, and let it show. However, they were no more cruel and vindictive—but no less, either—than most young girls forced into the company of someone they didn't much like, someone of fallen status whom their mother didn't much like either and made no particular effort to protect. Someone who, truth be told, had probably lorded it over *them*, just a little bit, when she was her father's favorite and they were the new girls in the household.

Neither were the step-sisters particularly ugly; this is something that came in with Disney, who always equates ugliness with evil. They were, in fact, quite acceptably attractive by the standards of their day.

Although it is true that when Eleanor was around, they tended to dim in her presence, in male eyes at least, as bright bulbs can be dimmed by a brighter one.

Eleanor *was* beautiful, of course. We have to give her that much if the rest of the story is going to make any sense. Like her step-sisters, she had been brought up as a child of the relatively prosperous merchant class, which ensured that she had been well-enough nourished as a babe to have grown up with good teeth and glossy hair and strong, straight bones—unlike the peasants, who were often afflicted with

rickets and other vitamin-deficiency diseases.

No doubt she had breasts and legs, like other young women, but whether her breasts were large or small, whether her legs were long or squat, is impossible to tell at this distant point in time.

We can tell from the story, though, that she was considered to be striking, and perhaps a bit unusual; so, since no-one knows what she really looked like, let's cater to the tastes of our own time and say that she was tall and coltish, with long lovely legs and small—but not *too* small—breasts, a contrast to many around her upon whom a diet consisting largely of potatoes and coarse black bread had imposed a dumpier sort of physique.

Since this tale is set in that part of Central Europe that had changed hands dozens of times in the past few hundred years and was destined to change hands again a few times more before the century was out, with every wave of raping-and-pillaging Romans, Celts, Goths, Huns, Russians, Mongols, and Turks scrambling the gene-pool a bit further, let's also say that she had red hair and green eyes and a pale complexion, a rare but possible combination, given the presence of Russian and Celtic DNA in the genetic stew. That should make her sufficiently distinctive. (It's possible, of course, that she *really* looked like a female Russian weight-lifter, complete with faint mustache, or like a walking potato, and you're welcome to picture her that way instead if you'd like—but if so, you must grant at least that she was a striking and *charismatic* weight-lifter or potato, one who had had men sniffing around her from the time she started to grow hair in places other than her head.)

In truth, like most “beautiful” women, who often are not really even pretty if you can catch them on those rare occasions when their faces are in repose, her allure was based in large part on her charisma and *elan*, and a personality that remained vital and intense in spite of a life that increasingly tried to grind her down.

Eleanor didn't wait on the others to the degree shown in the Disney version, of course—this was a hard society, and everyone had to work, including the step-mother and the two step-sisters. Much of the cost of maintaining the house (which was not a working farm, regardless of what the stories tell you, too close to the center of town, although they may have kept a few chickens) was defrayed by revenues from land that Eleanor's father had owned elsewhere, but those revenues had slowly declined since the father's death, and in order to keep a tenuous foot-hold on the middle-class, they had been forced to take in seamstress work, which occupied all of them for several hours a day.

It's true, though, that since her father died, two years before, and since revenues had declined enough to preclude keeping servants, that much of the rest of the work of maintaining the household had fallen on Eleanor's shoulders, in addition to her seamstress chores.

She found it bitterly hard, as would you; in fact, spoiled by modernity, we'd find it even more onerous than she did, and suffer even more keenly. Housework was hard physical labor in those days, especially in the backward hinterlands of Central Europe, where even the (from our perspective) minimal household conveniences that might be available to a rich family in London would not arrive for a long lifetime, or maybe two. Housework was brutal and unrelenting labor, stretching from dawn until well after dusk, the equivalent in its demands on someone's reserves of strength and endurance of working on a road-gang or in a coal mine; it was the main reason, along with the rigors and hazards of childbirth, why women wore out so fast and died so young. Not for nothing did the phrase "Slaving over a hot stove" come into existence; doing laundry was even worse, a task so grueling—pounding the clothes, twisting them dry, starting over again—that it was rarely tackled more than once a week even in households where there were several women to divide the work up amongst them; and scrubbing, inside or out, was done on your knees in any and all weathers, with a stiff-bristled brush and raw potash soap that stung your nostrils and blistered your hands.

Of course, every *other* woman in this society, except for the very richest, had to deal with these kind of labors as well, so there was nothing unique about Eleanor's lot, or any reason to feel sorry for her *in particular*, as the stories sometimes seem to invite us to do...the subtext pretty obviously being that she is an aristocrat-in-hiding, or at least a member of the prosperous upper class, being forced to do the work of a *peasant*. Think of that! Being made to work just like a common, ordinary girl! As if she wasn't any better than anyone else! (Oddly enough, this reaction of indignation usually comes from people who have to work for a living every day *themselves*, not from whatever millionaires or members of the peerage might be lurking in the audience.)

In fact, though, Eleanor had also been spoiled, not by modernity but by her father, sheltered by his money from most of the chores even a child of the merchant class would usually have had to become inured to...so perhaps she did feel it more keenly than most women of her day would have. Her father had also spoiled her in other, more significant ways, teaching her to read (something still frowned upon, if no longer actively forbidden by law), teaching her to love books and learning, teaching her to dream. Teaching her to be *ambitious*—but ambitious for what purpose? She had a good mind, and her father had given her the beginnings of a decent education, but what was she supposed to *do* with it? Further formal schooling was out of the question, even if there had been money for it—that was for men. All the professions were for men as well. There was nothing she could do, no way her life could change. She was doomed to stay here in this once-loved house she had come to hate, working like a slave day and night for people she didn't even like, much less consider to be family, until her youth and strength and beauty drained away like water spilled in the street, and she woke up one day to find herself spavined and old.

She could feel this doom closing in around her like a black cloud, making

every day a little more hopeless and bitter and grim. She could feel herself dying, a little bit every day, her mind dulling, her strength and resiliency waning.

Somehow, she had to get *out* of here.

But there was no way out...

After several months of this bleak circle, she decided at last that there was only one possible way to escape: she would trade sex for a better life—or at least a more comfortable one.

It was a choice that untold thousands of young women—and not a few men—had made before her, and that thousands more would make after her. She'd looked her situation over with cold-eyed clarity, and realized that she had no commodity to offer that anyone would ever value except for youth, beauty, and virginity—and that none of them were going to last long. A few more years of constant grinding toil would take care of the youth and beauty, and sooner or later one of the men who had been circling her with increasing persistence would corner her in the stables or behind a market stall or in an alley somewhere and rape her, and that would be the end of her virginity (a valuable commodity ever since syphilis had started to ravage Europe a few centuries back) as well. If he got her pregnant, she'd be stuck here forever.

Young as she was, she was not unaware of the trick that her body could be made to do when she huddled alone in the darkness on her cot at night, biting a dish-cloth to keep anyone from hearing the sounds that she couldn't stop herself from making, and she was not so hard-headed as to be immune to thoughts of love and romance and marriage. In fact, she'd exchanged hot glances, longing words, and one quick delicious kiss with Casimir, a big, lumbering, sweet-natured boy who worked in the glass foundry a street away. She was pretty sure that she could win his heart, perhaps even get him to marry her—but what good would that do? Even if they could somehow scrape up enough money to live on, she'd still be stuck in this stifling provincial town, living much the same kind of life she was living now. And then the children would start coming, one a year until she wore out and died...

No, love and marriage were not going to save her. Sex was going to have to do that. She'd have to trade her body to someone rich enough to take her out of this life, perhaps even, if things worked out for the best, out of this town altogether.

Eleanor's religious upbringing had not perhaps been of the strictest, her father tending towards clandestine secularism, but of course some qualms about the idea of selling herself in this fashion remained. Still, she had heard the women talking at the well or in the marketplace or even in the church when no man was around to hear, and it didn't sound all that difficult. Lay on your back, open your legs, let him grunt on top of you for five minutes while you stared at the ceiling. A lot less difficult than scrubbing the floor until your fingers bleed.

But if she was going to sell herself, she was damned if she wasn't going to get

the best price possible.

Eleanor prided herself on her clear-eyed logic and hard-headed rationality, but here's where her plan began to be tinged by a deep vein of pastel romanticism that she wouldn't even have admitted to herself that she possessed.

She had no intention of becoming a common whore, if whore she must be. Even a town of this size had a few such, and the life they lead was nothing to envy or emulate. No, she would set her sights higher.

Why not set them as high as they would go?

The Prince. She had seen him go by in a parade once, the year before, up on a prancing roan stallion, tall and handsome, his plumed hat nodding, the silver fastenings on his uniform gleaming in the sun. She'd even had hot dreams about him, those nights when his ghost rather than Casimir's had visited her in her bed.

She was realistic enough to know that marriage was out of the question. Princes didn't marry commoners, even those from families with a lot more money than her own. That was so ingrained in her worldview that she never entertained the possibility that the Prince would marry her, even as the remotest fantasy.

Princes did *fuck* commoners, though, that happened all the time, and always had. And if they liked them well enough, sometimes they *kept* them. Being a royal mistress didn't sound so bad; since she had no choice, she'd settle for that.

All she had to do was get him to want her.

Why not? He was a man, wasn't he? Every other man she knew pursued her and tried to grope her or worse when there was nobody else around, even men three times her age. Maybe a Prince would be no different.

And if for some reason the Prince *didn't* like her, she thought, with a flash of the practical shrewdness that was so typical of her, the palace would be full of other rich men. *Somebody* would want her.

There was a Ball at the palace every weekend when the King and his court were in residency during the summer months. Her family was not rich enough for any of them to be invited to these affairs, nor ever had been, even at their most prosperous. But she would get in *somehow*.

Well, we all know what comes next, of course. The dress made in secret, although there were no birds or mice to help her. Nor did she need any—she was, after all, a seamstress. There were no Fairy Godmothers either, no pumpkins turned to coaches, no magically conjured horses. She slipped out of the house while her step-mother, a woman who had been embittered and disappointed by life, was slowly drinking herself sodden with her nightly regimen of alternating glasses of *tisane* and brandy, and walked all the way through town to the river, the night air like velvet around her, the blood pounding in her throat, the castle slowly rising higher

and higher above the houses, blazing with lights, as she drew near.

Somehow, she got inside. Who knows how? Maybe the guards were reluctant to stop a beautiful and well-dressed young woman who moved with easy confidence. Maybe she walked in with a group of other party-goers. Maybe the guards were all drunk, and she just walked by them. Maybe there were no guards, in this sleepy backwater in a time without a major war brewing. Maybe there were guards, but they just didn't care.

However she did it, she got in, and it was everything she'd ever dreamed of.

It *was* glamorous. Give them their due, the aristocracy has always known how to do glamorous.

Although the grim Gothic tower with its battlements and crenellations and murder-holes still loomed darkly up behind, this part of the castle had been modernized and made into a palace instead. In the Grand Ballroom, there were floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the whole sweep of the town, which was stretched out below like a diorama on a tabletop, there were balconies and tapestried alcoves with richly embroidered Oriental hangings, there were flowers everywhere, and a polished marble floor that seemed to stretch on forever, shimmering in the light of a thousand candles like a lake of mist lit by moonlight. Out on the marble floor, people in vivid, multi-colored clothes twirled around like butterflies caught in a whirlwind, while music filled all the air, thick and rich and hot as blood, and made the nerves jump under the skin.

It *was* glamorous, as long as you didn't get too close to the privies (it was a warm summer night, after all). This would bother you, though, more than it bothered Eleanor, who was already used to an everyday level of stink that would have turned the stomachs of most moderns.

Cranking her charm to its highest setting, palms damp, she swallowed her fear and mingled.

She didn't really fool anyone, of course. She was a good seamstress, but the materials she'd had to work with were nowhere near fine enough for court fashion. But it didn't matter much. She was beautiful, and charming, and vivacious, and still had enough of the remnants of society manners learned before her family fell on harder times to get by—although she wasn't fooling anybody there, either. No matter. She was an exotic amusement, someone new in over-familiar court circles where everyone had worked through all possible permutations of their relationships with everyone else long before. They'd have tired of her within days, of course, but by then she might well have found some rich young gentleman willing to take her on as a toy, and perhaps even keep her for awhile...so her plan might actually have worked, if she'd been willing to settle for someone less exalted.

But then the Prince crossed the floor, and stood at the edge of the ring of preening young men who now surrounded her, and their eyes met, and his first grew

round with surprise, and then slowly grew hot.

He strode forward, the crowd of lesser men melting away before him, and held out his hand, imperiously commanding her to dance, all the while his eyes smoldered at her. She'd never seen anyone so handsome.

Eleanor took his hand and they spun away, and for a second, gliding across the softly gleaming marble floor, moving with him with the music all around them, it seemed like the perfect culmination of every fairy-tale she'd ever read.

Then he yanked her roughly aside into one of the curtained alcoves, tugging the hangings shut behind them. There was a divan in there, and an oil-lamp, and a small table with a nearly empty bottle of brandy on it. The air was thick and foul, with a strong reek of pungent animal musk to it, like the den of a panther or a bear, and the divan was rumpled and stained.

Startled, she started to speak, but the Prince waved her brusquely to silence. For a long moment, the Prince stared at her, coldly, sneeringly, contemptuously, almost as if he hated her. His heavy, handsome face was harsh and cruel, cold as winter ice in spite of the heat that burned in his small hard eyes. He was viciously drunk, his face flushed, swaying where he stood, and he reeked of brandy and sweat and old semen, a streak of which still glistened on his pants from some previous encounter earlier in the evening. He made a wet, gloating noise, like a greedy child smacking its lips, and swept Eleanor crushingly into his arms.

All at once, he was kissing her brutally, biting her lips, forcing his tongue into her mouth, his breath like death, the taste of him sour and rancid and bitter. He grabbed her breasts, squeezing them savagely with his powerful hands, mashing and twisting them, so that sudden blinding pain shot through her.

Then he was forcing her down onto the divan, bearing her down under his crushing weight, tearing at her clothes, forcing a knee roughly between her legs, prying them open.

If she'd been as hard-headed and practical as she thought she was, she would have laid back and let him force himself on her, endured his grunting and thrusting and battering either in silence or with as much of a simulation of passionate enjoyment as she could muster, let him contemptuously wipe his dick on her afterward and then tell him how witty that was. But as he bore her down, smothering her under his weight and stench, bruising her flesh with his vise-like fingers, all her buried romanticism came rushing to the surface—it wasn't supposed to be like this!—and as she heard her dress and undergarments rip under his tearing hands and felt the night air on her suddenly exposed breasts, she fought herself free with a sudden burst of panicked strength, and clawed the Prince's face.

They both leaped to their feet. The Prince stared at her in astonishment for a moment, three deep claw marks on his cheek dripping vivid red blood, and then came for her again, murder rather than sex on his mind this time.

Eleanor had been attacked before—once by a stablehand and once by a greengrocer in a lane behind the market at dusk—and she knew what to do.

She kicked the Prince hard in the crotch, putting her weight and the strength of her powerful young legs into it, and the Prince mewed and folded and fell, wrapping himself into a tight ball on the floor, for the instant too shocked by pain even to scream.

Eleanor's practicality returned with a rush. She was moments away from being arrested, and probably jailed for the rest of her life, certainly for many years. Maybe they'd even execute her. What the Prince had tried to do to her wouldn't matter, she knew. No one would care. All that would count was what *she* had done to *him*.

She gathered her ruined dress around her, hiding her breasts as well as she could, and fled the alcove. Straight across the Grand Ballroom and out of the palace, as fast as she could go without actually running, as voices began to rise in the distance behind her, and the palace clock chimed midnight.

You know the rest, or you think that you do.

The next day, the Prince did begin searching obsessively for her, but it was for revenge, not for love; the three red weals across his handsome face filled him with a rage that momentarily eclipsed even drinking and screwing, his usual preoccupations, and goaded him to furious action.

Fortunately for Eleanor, she had been wise enough not to use her real name, or her full name, at least, with those she'd talked with at the Ball, and as she was not a regular in court circles, nobody knew where to find her.

That was where the famous slipper came in. Yes, there was a slipper, but it was an ordinary one, not one made of glass. "Glass" is a mistranslation of the French word used by Perrault; what he really said was "fur." It wasn't fur eit her. For that matter, it wasn't really a slipper. It was an ordinary dress shoe of the type appropriate to that time and place.

But it *had* slipped off Eleanor's foot while she struggled with the Prince in the alcove, and it *was* infused with her scent. By mid-afternoon the next day, the secret police were using teams of keen-nosed hunting dogs, following her scent on the slipper, to try to track her through the streets to her home.

There was, of course, no nonsense about trying the slipper on the feet of every woman in the kingdom. Nor did Eleanor's step-sisters cut bits of their own feet off in order to try to get them to fit into the slipper, as some versions of this story would have it. Nor did flocks of angry birds fly down and peck out their eyes and bite off their noses (a scene Disney inexplicably missed somehow), as in other versions.

In fact, except for a glimpse of her step-mother lying down in a darkened

room with a wet cloth over her eyes, seen when Eleanor sneaked cautiously into the house late the previous evening, Eleanor never saw her step-mother or her step-sisters again.

The Prince had his hunt organized and moving by noon, pretty early for a Prince, especially a mammothly hung-over one, which shows you how serious he was about revenge. Fortunately for Eleanor, *she* was used to rising at the crack of dawn, so she got the jump on him.

In fact, she hadn't slept at all that night, but had spent the night with plans and preparations. She didn't know about the slipper-sniffing dogs, of course, but she knew that this was a small enough town that the Prince could find her eventually if he wanted to badly enough, and she was shrewd enough to guess that he would.

So by the time the sky was lightening in the east, and the birds were twittering in the branches of the trees in the wet gray dawn (perhaps arguing about whether pecking out the eyes of Eleanor's step-sisters was *really* a good use of their time), Eleanor was out the door with a coarse burlap sack in which she'd secreted a few hunks of bread and cheese, and what was left of her father's silver service, which usually resided in a locked highboy—the key for which was kept somewhere that Eleanor wasn't supposed to know about.

Her next stop was to intercept Casimir on his way to the glass foundry and talk faster and more earnestly than she'd ever had in her life, for she'd suddenly realized that although she still wanted to get *out*, she didn't want to go without *him*.

What she said to convince him, we'll never know. Perhaps he wasn't all that difficult to convince; having no family and only minimal prospects, he had little to lose here himself. Perhaps he'd wanted to run away with her all along, but was too shy to ask.

Whatever she said, it worked. He slipped back into his room to retrieve from under a loose floorboard a small amount of money he'd been able to save—perhaps against the day he could convince Eleanor to marry him—and then they were off.

By now, everybody in town knew about the slipper and the hunt for the Mystery Girl, and you could already hear the hounds baying in the distance.

They escaped from town by hiding in a dung cart—Eleanor's idea, to kill her scent.

After scrubbing in a fast-moving stream, while she shyly hid her breasts from him and he pretended not to look, they set off on foot across the countryside, walking the back roads to avoid pursuit, hitching rides in market-bound farmer's carts, later catching a narrow-gauge train that started and stopped, stopped and started, sometimes, for no apparent reason, sitting motionless for hours at tiny deserted stations where weeds grew up through the tracks and dogs slept on their backs on the empty sun-drenched platforms, all four legs in the air. In this manner,

they inched their way across Europe, slowly running through Casimir's small store of cash, living on black bread, stale cheese, and sour red wine.

In Hamburg, they sold Eleanor's father's silver to buy passage on a ship going to the United States, and some crudely-forged identity papers. Before they were allowed aboard with their questionable papers, Eleanor had to blow the harbormaster, kneeling before him on the rough plank floor of his office, splinters digging into her knees, while he jammed his thick dirty cock that smelled like a dead lizard into her mouth, and she tried not to gag.

Casimir never found out; there were some of the harbormaster's companions who would have preferred for *him* to pay their unofficial passage fee rather than her, and Casimir, still being a boy in many ways, would have indignantly refused, and they would have been caught and maybe killed. She considered it a small enough price to pay for getting a chance at a new life in a new world, and rarely thought about it thereafter. She figured that Casimir had nothing to complain about, as when she did come to his bed, after they had been safely married in the New World, she came to it as a virgin, and they had the bloody sheet to prove it (just as well, too—Casimir was a good man, and a sweet-natured one, but he *was* a man of his time, after all, and couldn't be expected to be *too* liberal about things).

They made their way eventually to Chicago, where work for seamstresses and glaziers could be had, and where they had forty-five tumultuous years together, sometimes happy, sometimes not, until one bitter winter afternoon, carrying a pane of glass through the sooty city snow, Casimir's heart broke in his chest.

Eleanor lived another twenty years, and died on a cot in the kitchen near the stove (in the last few days, she'd refused to be taken upstairs to the bedroom), surrounded by children and grandchildren, and by the homey smells of cooked food, wood smoke, and the sharper smells of potash and lye, all of which she now found oddly comforting, although she'd hated them when she was young. She regretted nothing that she'd ever done in her life, and, except for a few moments at the very end when her body took over and struggled uselessly to breathe, her passing was as easy as any human being's has ever been.

After the Old King died, the Prince only got to reign for a few years before the monarchy was overthrown by civil war. The Prince and the rest of the royal family and most of the nobility were executed, kind or cruel, innocent or corrupt. The winning side fell in its turn, some decades later, and eventually a military junta, run by a local Strongman, took over.

Years later, Eleanor's grandson was in command of a column of tanks that entered and conquered the town, since one of the Strongman's successors had allied himself with the Axis.

Later that night, Eleanor's grandson climbed up to the ruins of the royal castle, mostly destroyed in an earlier battle, and looked out over the remains of the

floor of the Grand Ballroom, open now to the night sky, weeds growing up through cracks in the once brilliantly polished marble that still gleamed dully in the moonlight, and wondered why he felt a moment of drifting melancholy, a twinge of sorrow that quickly dissipated, like waking from a sad dream that fades even as you try to remember it, and is gone.