

A RETELLING OF 'THE TREE PRINCE'¹

Once upon a time there was a princess with flowing golden hair. She lived on the lip of the old forest, where ravening creatures dwelled. The princess was called Roxana. She did not want to marry a boar.

'You will marry him,' the king bellowed. 'You will marry him or you are not my daughter.'

The boar said nothing. He scratched at the floor with his trotters.

Roxana's chest was ice cold. She tried squeezing her hands into fists, but her numb fingers would not oblige. She knew what was coming next. The fear that rattled inside her body told her. She had two options: marry this beast or run away forever.

How could she leave? There was nowhere she could go, no one she could run to.

The boar puffed air from his nostrils. Roxana stared into his little piggy eyes and contemplated her fate. Maybe a marriage of convenience would be tolerable. Separate castles, separate lives.

The boar squealed. His little trotters wheeled. He looked at her and bleated desperately.

No. Roxana would have to go.

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Iris sat cross legged in the park, her well-worn backpack pulled into her lap. The sun blazed and Iris shielded her eyes.

'We could sit in the shade, if you'd like,' Amy said.

¹ 'The Tree Prince,' I. Jones (ed.), *English Folk Tales*, London: Coltsfoot Press, 1997, pp. 23-35.

‘No, that’s fine. This is fine.’

Amy was stretched out in the grass. Sunglasses on. A bottle of alcohol free beer in her hand. Iris looked at her then looked away. She did not want to be caught staring. If she had her way, she would stare. She’d stare at Amy’s long legs, the way her shins shone in the sun. Her bare feet and painted toenails. Shiny apple red. And of course there was Amy’s black bra, just visible through the v of her t-shirt. The back of Iris’s neck turned hot at the thought. She made sure she was looking down at her own hands, her fingers, the green-leaf pattern of her dress. Anywhere safe.

‘So,’ Amy said. ‘I have something to tell you. It’s not a secret, exactly, but I wanted to tell you alone. Out here. I couldn’t have told you inside.’

‘Go for it.’

Iris’s chest squeezed. She guessed what it was. What else could it possibly be? There had been hints for months. The way Amy looked at her. The way she watched out for her. The many times Amy’s gentle fingers found Iris’s side, resting there, reassuring her. This could only be one thing.

Amy took a swig of her beer. ‘I’ve been – I’ve wanted to tell you for some time – I’ve been seeing Katya.’

Iris’s mind went blank. Her face turned slack.

‘I said I’ve been seeing Katya.’

Iris shook her head. ‘Who?’

She only knew one Katya. A young woman who had just finished secondary school. She was pretty – she looked like a model – but that couldn’t be who Amy meant.

‘Katya with the eyes? Katya who dresses like she’s just off a catwalk, that Katya?’

Amy smiled. ‘It’s new – the relationship is new – but I really like her. I wanted to tell you about it.’

‘And there’s nothing else you want to tell me? Nothing you’ve wanted to tell me for a while?’

Amy paused with her lips on her beer bottle. For a long moment she said nothing. ‘No,’ she said. ‘I don’t think so. What else would there be? Iris, is something wrong?’

Iris nodded. She wanted it all to spill out. She wanted to share everything that was wrong in this moment. Goddamnit, she was sitting here in the blazing summer heat in this stupid dress that was too warm. All because Amy had said she’d liked it once. Iris had developed a taste for alcohol free beer just because Amy liked it. How could she be so idiotic? Clearly, there was so much wrong with this present moment.

‘Nothing’s wrong,’ she said. ‘Just tired. I had a long night last night.’

‘Oh, anything interesting?’

Iris wanted to scream. ‘No. Nothing interesting. I just couldn’t sleep. I might... I might go soon.’

‘We only just got here.’

‘Yes, but I didn’t realise how tired I was. I’m really sorry, I’m just not up for this.’

Iris stood up on wobbly legs. She hitched her bag onto her shoulder. Was she really leaving now over this? Part of her felt small, petty. Part of her felt like a betrayer.

‘I’m off,’ she said and gave a half-hearted wave.

She walked across the hot, flashing grass; around the elderly building that had been turned into a cafe; along the long, curving line of a path. Finally she stopped at a cluster of trees. Here she could be out of sight. Here she could vanish.

Iris crumpled to the ground. She wanted to let herself blub. Her face was burning hot, her throat tight, but she couldn’t cry.

‘God, what an idiot I’ve been.’

There was still that small voice telling her that she was the betrayer in this situation. She and Amy were supposed to be friends. It wasn't Amy's fault Iris had spent all this time yearning for her. A sensible person would understand that. But Iris did not want to be sensible. She did not want to be the bigger person, the well-rounded person. She wanted to cry. She leaned back against the tree and willed the tears to fall.

What was that story, that fairy tale she half remembered from childhood? She tried to summon it up. It was about a princess who ran away into the forest. The princess crumpled under that magical tree.

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Roxana had been running for miles through the dark forest. There were tiny twigs inside her slippers and, with every step, the twigs jabbed into her feet. This was agony. Roxana's throat burned, her eyes burned, her legs burned. Worst of all, she did not know where she was going. What was she even running to?

She crumpled to the ground. Dead leaves and detritus stuck to her hands and knees. She spat out a piece of something that had flown into her mouth. She began to heave. Her body was overtaken by tiredness, by aches, by emptiness. Roxana buried her face in her hands and lay down at the foot of a tree. She did not know what to do next, where to go next. Her whole body cried out for sleep. She could only give in.

When she awoke it took a moment to remember where she was and what had driven her here. The forest looked different in the daytime. Yellow sun lit the trees and suffused them with warmth.

Roxana sat up. The tree under which she'd found shelter had changed, and it was not just the morning light. At night the tree had been bare. Today, each bough was heavy with golden apples.

'Surely not,' Roxana said aloud. Surely this was not an apple tree here in a forest of oak and beech and hornbeam.

'For you, my princess, I will be an apple tree, a cherry tree, an elm. I will be anything you desire.'

Roxana gasped. 'Who is that? Who is speaking?'

Once more, the tree spoke: 'I am here for you, my princess. I will provide you with anything you desire.'

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Iris pulled out her phone and found her plant identification app. The tree she was leaning against was not an apple tree. It was certainly not a magical apple-cherry-anything tree like the one in the story. She took pictures of the bark, the leaves, and the silhouette. The app said this was a London plane (*Platanus x hispanica*). 76% probability. It didn't mean anything to Iris either way.

'Will you protect me like the tree in the fairy tale?' she asked, touching the tree's papery, peeling skin.

Iris inhaled the dry, woody smell. This was the first time she had been close enough to one of these trees to smell it. Most of the time, she went to parks to run. She'd have her earphones in and she'd block out the outside world. Now there was no block, no barrier, just herself and the tree. This was the closest she had come to nature in London.

‘You are beautiful,’ she said. ‘You’re alive. And you don’t care about my problems at all. How long have you been here, eh?’

She googled how long London planes lived. There were no definitive answers. Apparently, there was a London plane in Greenwich that was over 300 years old. And the oldest living examples were planted around 1660. There was no mention of this specific tree. Was it as old as all that?

She stroked the scaly bark and thanked the tree. For what, she wasn’t sure. Perhaps for its shelter. Or for the old story it had summoned up in her memory. It had been one of her favourite fairy tales as a kid, but she hadn’t thought about it in years. How strange was that?

She had a copy of that book at home somewhere. One of her grandmother’s old Ladybird books from the 1960s with terrifying illustrations. Especially scary was the picture of the old witch. Iris shivered at the memory. She would go home and find that book.

On the way home, Iris stopped in at Tesco for a bottle of sauvignon blanc. She needed it after the kind of day she’d had. At home, she put the bottle in the freezer to chill it quickly. Then she checked the cupboard for glasses, as if they might have disappeared since the last time she’d drunk wine. It had been five years. Five years without any alcohol. Five years carefully checking labels and percentages. Of using those god-awful wine jelly cubes in stews instead of the real thing, just so she wouldn’t have an open bottle in the kitchen.

She had to wait at least fifteen minutes until the wine was cool enough to drink. Iris used the time to find the book. A shabby little hardback held together with tape. On the front cover was a picture of a beautiful woman with long blond hair, her arms around a tree.

God, why did the hair have to remind her of Amy? She thought of Amy, of Katya. She imagined them together now, being mindlessly happy. That sensible voice told Iris that none

of this was their fault. That they were allowed to be happy. She crushed that voice down until it was less than nothing. Iris went back to the freezer and poured herself a drink.

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‘Do you want an apple, my princess?’

The apples were larger than any Roxana had ever seen. Each was the size of a grapefruit. Roxana was careful plucking one down from the tree, frightened that it might hurt him.

‘Don’t worry, it does not hurt.’

Roxana froze. How could he have known?

‘Who are you?’ she asked.

‘I am a tree. And your humble servant.’

‘No, really, who could you be? You must be enchanted by some powerful magic.’

The tree laughed. ‘Yes, that is one way of putting it.’

Roxana took a bite of the apple. It tasted like a cool spring morning. She sat at the base of the tree, leaning against his strong trunk, and devoured the apple like nothing she had eaten before.

‘Tell me who you are,’ she said finally, after licking the last of the juice from her fingers.

‘My story is not a happy one, princess. It might hurt you to hear. I was once a human prince. I was turned into a tree by an evil witch, and the only way to turn me back is by another witch’s magic. All these years, I have stood alone in this forest waiting for a witch to pass by. No one with powerful enough magic has come. I am trapped here.’

‘But now, I am here.’ Roxana said, jumping to her feet.

‘You are not a witch.’

‘I am not rooted down either. I can find a witch and bring her to you!’

* * *

Iris felt as if she’d been kicked down a hill. After the first bottle of wine, she had bought another bottle from the corner shop. It had tasted foul, so she followed it with thick-tasting corner shop vodka. What had happened after that was not clear in Iris’s mind.

She was in bed. That was a positive. Before now she had woken up in the hospital or in the police station. Home and in her own bed were massive improvements.

Caw-caw, caw-caw.

The sound was just outside her window. Iris peeled herself up and pulled open the curtains. There was a magpie sitting on next door’s roof. Just a few feet away. What was it doing there?

‘You’ve come to check on me,’ Iris said. A headache sliced into the side of her head, her teeth ached, her eye drooped. She had found the worst of both worlds between drunk and hungover. ‘You wouldn’t let anything bad happen to me, would you, Mr Magpie?’

The tiles of the neighbour’s roof were thick with moss. Almost like a carpet. How had Iris failed to notice that before now?

Cuh-cooo-coo, cuh-cooo-coo.

There was a wood pigeon. Since when was there this much nature in South Tottenham? Iris thought of the tree she’d seen yesterday. That was the start of it. The moment she’d touched the tree, smelled it, felt it. That’s when things had changed. That’s when she had changed.

And she'd ruined it all by buying that bottle of wine. She remembered Amy, remembered Katya. It still stung. What was more painful was the knowledge that she'd given in. That she'd started drinking again. Five years of sobriety down the toilet because of an unrequited crush. All because Iris did not want to be a mature adult about all this. What a fool she'd been.

There was a piece of paper on her bedroom floor. A small rectangle. Colourful. Iris looked closer and saw that it was a page from that children's book. A full-page illustration of the princess on her journey to find a witch to reverse the spell. Hail poured down around the princess, the sky was swirling grey.

On the landing outside Iris's bedroom there were more pages. Pictures and text. Iris ached too badly to pick them up and put them in some kind of order. She stared with bleary eyes. Scattered down the stairs were the innards of the book. Where the covers were, she couldn't guess. Clearly Iris had done this, but she couldn't make herself remember.

Iris stared at herself in the mirror. Her usually smooth brown skin was puffy and pink. Her eyes were bloodshot. She might have been imagining it, but there seemed to be even more visible blood vessels on the side of her nose. That would be a permanent reminder of what she had done. She splashed water on her face and dampened her short afro hair. She just needed to feel the coolness.

But no amount of fresh, clean water would wash away what had happened. Today, she was going to have to start again from the beginning. Day one all over again. This time, she knew where to start.

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Roxana looked at the crone accusingly. ‘What do you mean, your magic will not work?’

‘Just as I say, ma’am. It won’t work. In the initial days or weeks after the spell was cast, maybe I could have reversed the curse and turned him back into a man. Not now. How long has it been?’

‘One hundred years,’ the tree answered. ‘For one hundred springs, I have been stuck like this. One hundred summers, autumns, and cursed winters. Are you telling me there is no way back?’

The crone shook her head. Her mouth was a thin line, her eyes soft and sympathetic. ‘I am sorry, sir. Now, I must take my leave.’

The crone walked away, soon disappearing among the old oaks and beeches. Roxana wanted to follow the woman, wanted to shake her.

‘She didn’t even try!’ Roxana said, pounding her hand with a fist. ‘I’ll find another witch. Someone more powerful. Someone who will at least do something, this is not over, my love.’

Roxana stopped. Had she truly just said that word? Love. After all they had been through together, perhaps she truly did love the tree prince. The revelation made her whole body feel light, as if she might step upwards into the sky.

‘You love me?’ the tree asked. ‘Roxana, if you love me, it does not matter to me whether I am a tree or a man. As long as I have your love, I am the happiest being in the world.’

Roxana ran to the tree and wrapped her arms around him. She melted against him and kissed his jagged bark. She felt aflame. Surging through her body was all the magic of true love’s kiss.

* * *

Iris took out her earphones and turned off her music. She sat cross legged at the base of the tree, facing its trunk. It was a London plane, just like the one she had seen in Clissold Park. She placed both hands on the scaly bark and hummed. This was it. This was the place where she could restart her life. Without alcohol. Without self pity. At least she had her own tree prince.

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