

Fox and Hare and Great White Bear

----- A story by Jackie Morris -----

In every image there are as many stories as there are people who look. Each begins with a curiosity.

Who is the woman in blue?

Does the drummer summon the fish with the rhythm of her music?

Does the boat follow the fish as they wander the world's winds, or do the fish follow the boat, drawn by the music?

Where are they going?

What are they leaving?

The fox and the hare and the great white bear had seen this before. On days like this when the sea was a palette of colours; green and slate green and silver and blue, paynes grey and smalt, and glass green. They knew how the fish would rise when colours sang in the water, and they knew how each fish pulled the snow into the sky with their great fan tails, searching for dreams, carried a sliver of the old moon in their eyes, keeping the moon safe until she grew in her power to fulness again. They knew that on days like this it would seem as if the whole world were made of music and this would be where answers could be found.

For a year they had been walking, together over the white, footfall after footfall, through snow, in new moon and full moon, and each of the moons with its own name, its own story. She carried her question to the edge, to ask the fish for an answer.

"What," she asked, "would have the power to call all of the birds to make a bridge of their wings to stretch across the universe?"

And the fish answered, as always, with a story.

It was said that he was born to the song of the nightingales, and their thrilling notes were the first music he heard. And so, from his birth, he understood the language of birds. And if some are born rich and some are born poor there are those who understand the nature of true wealth does not lie in gold, but somewhere more precious.

As a babe he would lie in his cradle as his mother worked, watch the light in the leaves dance patterns across his crib and listen to the language of birds. When she worked the fields he was strapped to her back and would watch the wild geese, an autumn arrow across the sky. In spring he thrilled to the voices of orioles. And as he grew he began to help his mother, clearing the fields of stones, bending to plant rice, standing to watch the cranes dance to their own music, in the turning world.

His father was often away, caring for sheep on the mountain pastures, but one day, home for a while, he took down a painted box from a high shelf. In the box, wrapped in golden silk, an intricately carved bamboo flute. He handed it to his son, who admired the object, intrigued, then gave it back to his father. And when his father raised the instrument to his lips and played the first note the boy knew he could never be a farmer. His life belonged to the flute, to music.

He learned how to make his own instrument. He learned to play. Everywhere he went he carried the flute, every spare moment he practiced. And he made new flutes, from bamboo, from wood, from the bones of a swan. And with every new making the sound became richer, wilder, deeper.

Now when he played the nightingales would come to listen, thread their music through his, thrilling and filling the starlight hours. When he went with his father to watch over the sheep it was said the wolves would gather to listen. There was a wild haunting ache to the young man's music, which left within it space for the wild song of the world to enter, the voices of others, the river, the wind, the colours of butterflies and moths, wild flowers and always birdsong.

It was said that his music could heal even the most broken of hearts or minds.

People would gather to hear him play and it wasn't long before musicians made pilgrimage to his door to request that he make them a flute.

And so he began to make flutes for others. He would look at the person, listen closely to their colours, and know exactly how to make the best instrument to fit them perfectly.

His fame spread, tales of a shepherd boy troubadour. By now he was a young man, restless in the world, spending most of his time in the mountains, charming the wolves, making laments powerful enough that the moon would stop in her tracks to listen.

And this was how his came to the attention of the Emperor.

The Emperor sent a summons. He wanted the boy to come and play to his daughter, struck down by a melancholy so deep she hardly ate, spending her days locked in a tall tower, refusing food, sleeping and sighing and wasting away. He offered wealth. The boy thanked him, but said he could not leave the mountains. He did not need money.

The Emperor sent again, this time a command. The boy said he could not come as he was learning from the birds.

The Emperor was angry. But he was also measured. He knew that a songbird in a cage does not sing as sweet as one who flies free. He commissioned a portrait of his beloved child, and sent this to the young man.

The boy left the mountains, travelled over the sea, learned the music of waves, came to the Emperor's door.

Every night for seven nights he sat at the foot of the princess' tower and played. In moonlight and starlight, as shooting stars fell he played. As the rain added a rhythm to his music he played. As the lights of the aurora danced in the sky, he played. Night birds came and added a chorus and the wind threaded through the leaves of the forest. His music became a current that was one with the river and on the seventh night the princess rose from her bed and went to the window. Notes from the flute lifted skyward, a simple, dark love song, out from the mind of the boy and into her heart.

Did she fall in love from the first note that entered her dreaming mind? Probably.

Was the Emperor pleased to witness the revival of his child?

Yes. But..... she was betrothed to the King in the North, a treaty of great trade and power. And if that king was 60 years old, well, such was the ways of power. And if now she had fallen in love with this peasant musician, well, that had not been a part of his plan.

On the eighth night there was silence. The boy had been exiled. Far away to the other side of the universe, where his music could never again reach the ears of the princess.

But the Emperor, who understood wealth and the power of politics, failed to comprehend the power of music and wild magic.

Far away the boy began to play. Each note summoned a bird. Each bird spread wide their wings, all the colours of a rainbow of feathers, blackbird and starling, thrush and oriel, eagle and wren, flamingo and crane, nightingale and owl, sparrow and finch, turtle dove and collared dove, gannet and heron, parrot and plover and curlew and pintail, songbird and hawk, sea bird and river bird, hummingbird and toucan. All the birds of the air sent someone, and together they made a bridge of their wings that spanned the universe, from the boy to the tower.

On one side he began to walk, even as she stepped out of her window onto the wings of the dancing cranes. One wing, one step at a time, and still he played, lending the wings of the birds strength through his music, until they met at the apex of the arch, where they danced to the music of the spheres.

The woman in blue thought for a while. She could hear, distant, yet clear, the music of a flute threading through the waves. She gathered the threads of the answer, thanked the fish, and began a new journey.

In every story there are as many images as people who have ears to listen and hearts to hold it.