

TELL ME A STORY NANA

A Book of Bedtime Stories For Families

by

Melanie Graham
and Her Family

Dedicated to Betty-Jean Graham

(also known as
Nana)

Introduction:

The children began piling out of the car the moment it came to a stop in the driveway of the small house. Three little figures struggled to run up the walk, dragging knapsacks and bedrolls while shouting "Nana, Nana..."

Their mother waited to shut off the engine and followed at a more leisurely pace. She was dressed for an evening out but seemed in no hurry to go anywhere. She paused a moment before following the children up the walk way and looked wistfully at the little house. The number of times she'd washed those windows, painted the trim and swept the walk. And the roses climbing the front lattice were still the most wonderful shade of coral she'd ever seen, and sweet smelling! She stopped by the old tree to touch her initials, carved years ago. She'd been much shorter then. The children had vanished in the front door, but she couldn't resist a brief visit to the old porch swing. She smiled at memories of shy good night kisses then shook her head as she rose to greet the old woman who appeared at the door.

"Hi Mom". The two women embraced and the old woman glanced at the porch swing with a chuckle.

"The stories that swing could tell..." she smiled at the younger woman and then turned and led her into the house.

The inside of the house was cluttered with old photos and books, knick knacks and worn furniture. Every item seemed full and ripe to bursting with stories. Upstairs could be heard the banging and thumping of children unpacking. The two women went to the back of the house to a large kitchen. Windows on two walls looked out over a kitchen garden and a tree with a tire swing. Bowls and utensils were laid out with the ingredients for all manner of tasty things and an old percolator pot of fresh coffee sat on the stove. The younger woman went to the cupboard for two cups, poured coffee and joined her mother at the table. They sat and sipped quietly for a few minutes, looking up at the ceiling after the occasional loud thump from upstairs.

"Thanks Mom." the younger woman began. " They adore weekends here." She looked around, taking in the marks on the wall that had charted her growth. "Can't say as I blame them." She smiled to herself.

"Well," the old woman watched her daughter thoughtfully, " You, I had to teach and discipline, you and your brothers...." she laughed "them I can spoil....it's my job"

The younger woman laughed gently as she finished her coffee and rose to go.

"You spoiled us too..... You've got my number, so call if anything comes up." she checked her watch. "I've got to run." She embraced her mother again and headed back to the front of the house. "Guys, she called up the stairs, "I'm leaving....."

The thuds paused briefly and three voices chorused out "Bye Mom..." then the thudding and laughter resumed.

She turned to her mother and shrugged. "They miss me already" she hugged her mother again. "I'll be back Sunday after supper, OK?"

Her mother returned the embrace then shooed her towards the door. "Get going. they're fine and you're late"

The old woman stood at the bottom of the stairs and waited as she listened to the sound of the car starting up and pulling away. She looked up at the ceiling as the sounds paused, then looked back at the stairs expectantly. A descending clatter heralded the approach of the children. They glanced at the front door then turned their full attention on their grandmother and all began speaking at once.

Nana, for that was their name for her, simply stood and smiled, hands on hips, while they ran down their torrent of words. Snatches of stories from school, tales of the family dog, lost teeth and new shoes jostled for attention.

When the children ran out of breath, their grandmother stood to one side and gestured them towards the kitchen. "Wash up and we'll talk while we get the cookies started."

After a moments hesitation the children exploded down the short hall to the kitchen, their chatter echoing behind them. The old woman followed, chuckling softly to herself and shaking her head.

It was some time later. The house was filled with the lingering smell of baking and full dark had settled outside. A fire danced gently in the fireplace and the ordered clutter of the living room had been pushed back to make room for sleeping bags, quilts, pillows and teddy bears. Three tired and full children lay cocooned and staring at the flames. The old woman sat in her favourite wing back chair, eyes closed, smiling contentedly. At length one of the children rolled over to watch her. Nana's face seemed so incredibly old, and yet so alive. The child smiled.

"Tell us a story Nana, please?"

The old woman slowly opened her eyes and regarded each child in turn and then gazed thoughtfully into the fire. Her eyes closed and she hummed a little. The children waited, familiar with this pause before a telling.

They could almost see Nana casting about in some inner library for the right story. For a few moments , the crackle and hiss of the fire were the only sounds. Finally, she began.....

The Dancing Puppet

Let me tell you a story whose place in space and time has fallen beyond remembering. In a comfortable mountain village there lived a gentle couple who made toys. They had made toys for as long as anyone in the area could remember. He was a woodcarver and she was a seamstress and painter. But these words are too flat and empty to describe the magic they worked. >>From their fingers life seemed to flow into wood and fabric, and paint was no longer just paint. It became, instead, a kind of living colour that would shift and change with the light or your mood.

The toyshop in the village was a busy, happy place. No doubt the couple might have been wealthy many times over. People came from all over the land to buy their toys. But they were a kind hearted pair and gave away almost as many toys and games as they sold. Still and all, they were very happy and lived a good life. They had a cozy home above the shop but most evenings they could be seen quietly working together at the table in the shop window, long after the village market had shut down for the night.

It was on just such a night that this story begins. The old man had finished carving a wooden puppet earlier in the day and his wife had finally finished dressing the little fellow in a colourful jesters suit, complete with bells on his hat and the toes of his shoes. All that was missing was his face.

Weary from a long day the old man got up from the table and stretched. He walked around to where the old woman sat assembling her paint pots and brushes. He stood behind her a moment and rubbed her shoulders, smiling as he gazed out the window into the darkness.

"Come to bed " he suggested. "His face will keep 'til morning."

The old woman reached up and patted one of his hands, smiling and shaking her head.

"No, it doesn't seem right somehow, to leave him through the night without a face." She looked up at the old man. "I'll only be a little while. You go ahead and read a bit."

He gave her shoulders a last squeeze, kissed the top of her head and made his way to the stairs at the back of the shop.

"You're a funny old woman you know." he called back as he began up the stairs.

"And you're a tired old man" she laughed back as she began to work.

"Now go on. I won't be long."

In the grey light just before dawn the old man woke with a start, knocking his book to the floor. He reached across the bed for his wife but she wasn't there. The bed on her side was cold and had not been slept in at all. Concerned he struggled out of bed and shrugged into his robe as he shuffled into his slippers. Muttering to himself he headed for the stairs.

"Silly old woman...ought to know better"

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs in some confusion. His wife was still seated at the table but she must have fallen asleep. Something didn't look right though and he hurried towards her. The puppet still lay in her lap without a face and her favourite brush, covered in dried red paint, lay on the floor. Her eyes were closed and her lips were gently curved in a peaceful half smile, but there was no colour left to her skin. He reached for her hand, still cradling the puppet, but it was cold as ice. With a roar of grief and outrage he pulled her to his chest and cradled her there as he knelt before her chair. Tears flowed down his cheeks and his shoulders shook with sobs. He was alone.

It was many days before he could return to the shop in peace. At first there was too much to do, too many people coming in and out. He sat at the window table through it all, nodding his thanks, unmindful of the words spoken or the people speaking. His gaze remained fixed on some farway point, lost between now and never. One day he realised that the shop was at last empty. Numb, he looked around him. Dead and drying flowers were everywhere, covering up the toys. Absently he began to clear the table by the window.

"She would never tolerate this mess, " he muttered to himself as he brushed loose petals to the floor. "and I'll have to sweep.."

He stopped when he uncovered the little wooden puppet, his empty face blankly confronting the ceiling. Someone had tidied up her paints and cleaned the brushes too. Gently he put them back in her favourite order and placed the brushes where she could easily reach them. It felt better that way. He slowly picked up the puppet, its bells jingling softly, and settled into her chair. He closed his eyes and breathed deep. This had been her happiest place, this chair, large, padded and worn. He could still smell her here too, the sunshine, fresh bread smell that had been part of his every breath for so long. He felt himself waiting to hear what song she would begin to hum under her breath, she seemed so near. Sighing he opened his eyes and looked at the puppet. There would be no more humming. He placed the puppet on the table and rolled up his sleeves. It wouldn't be perfect, but for her, he would finish this last toy. He reached

for a brush and selected a colour. No it wouldn't be perfect. He wiped his eyes, one then the other, with the back of his hand and planned his first brush strokes.

The next morning the old man was awake before dawn, but he lay in his bed for a long time without moving. When he finally eased himself painfully up, the sky was pink with fresh light, but he was as weary as though he'd worked through the night. Through habit he dressed and went to the shop. The fire had to be lit, the sweeping done and water set to boil for coffee. His habits, set by years, carried him along. He faltered when steps were missing in the routine. Now he had to set out the bread and cheese as well, not just cut off sausage and bring in the milk.

As he passed the window table he glanced at the little puppet he'd finished the night before. Its merry hat and bright bells were a poor match for the face he'd created. Poor thing, he thought as he gazed at its sad expression. In a way he'd poured all his grief into that last effort and the result was a small face that could break your heart. He sighed as he picked it up and took it to a wall of finished toys. Well it was dry now. He'd hang it up with the others.

The days wandered by, each like the one before it and after it. He made no more toys. The joy was gone. Mostly he sat in her chair and watched the children at play. An occasional customer would come by, but he seemed so reluctant to sell his toys, they soon stopped coming in except to say good day. In time there was a fine coat of dust on the toys and tools of the shop. Only the window table remained clean and set up for work, her brushes and paints carefully arranged.

A day came by that was different. A strange carriage had come through the village in the early morning. The old man had watched it go by as he drank his coffee. In the early afternoon the bell over the shop door rang as a woman came in with a young girl in a wheeled chair. The woman had on some sort of uniform and looked about the shop in some distaste, carefully avoiding contact with the dusty shelves and table tops.

The girl barely looked about at all. She lay back in her chair and looked wearily into the distance. She hardly moved. The old man stood up from the window table as the woman approached.

"Yes," he inquired, "may I help you?" though he couldn't imagine how.

"Well," the woman began nervously, "Your shop was highly recommended as a place of wonderful toys." She looked about in disappointment. "Perhaps I've come to the wrong town..."

"Perhaps you have," he returned to the table. "We used to make toys..." but he could say no more after opening the statement with 'we'.

The woman turned to push the wheeled chair to the door when the girl reached up and tugged on her sleeve. She bent to the child for a whispered conversation then rolled her back to the table where the old man again sat staring out the window.

"Apparently this is the right place." she sniffed. "My employer has asked me to allow this child to choose any toys she wishes from your store." She reached into her bag. "I will pay whatever you ask."

The old man turned to look at her in some distaste then gazed sadly at the little girl. He looked into her eyes and reached out to take her delicate little hand in his large gnarled one.

"Money cannot buy what you need," he whispered, "can it child? Come", he said as he lifted her from the chair. "Let us see what we can find for you." She weighed nothing in his arms.

The nurse, for that is what she was, shrieked, just a little and followed after them.

"Please, put her back! She's far too delicate! Sir!"

But the old man ignored her and the little girl almost smiled as she laid her head back on his shoulder and looked at the toys on the walls and shelves. A little of the weariness slipped from her eyes. Finally, after circling the shop almost three times, she raised her arm and pointed to the sad faced little puppet on the wall.

The old man was torn. He looked long and hard at the puppet, tears threatening his eyes. But when he looked back to the face of the little girl, he saw such a light beginning to shine there. He blinked his eyes clear, shifted her slight weight and reached down the puppet. Placing it in the girls arms he headed to the window table where the light was better. The nurse hovered behind him as he made his way through the shop.

"Give that to me." she demanded. "It's filthy!" She tried to move around him to grab the dusty toy, but he shifted his shoulder to block her. The child seemed completely absorbed by the puppet. The old man smiled, his first smile in what seemed like a lifetime.

The nurse began digging in her purse and nattering about money. "No charge.." he murmured. Gently he tucked the child back into her chair and wheeled her to the door. The nurse huffed and puffed behind him, trying push him aside. He almost laughed as he watched her storm away pushing her

charge down the village street.

The next morning it didn't feel so strange to put out the bread and cheese, and getting up hadn't seemed quite so difficult. When he went to the shop window table he looked around with clearer eyes. Today, yes today he'd dust the shop. How could anyone buy anything in a place this shabby? He settled into her chair and breathed deep of her scent, eyes closed, before he began to sip his coffee. Softly he hummed to himself as he watched the village stir to life.

It was a glorious summer afternoon, some weeks later when the old man saw the nurse rushing up the street to his shop. He'd set up a work bench outside and had begun carving wood again. One of the young lads in the village had become entranced with the wood working, so the two worked side by side most days now. He looked up as the nurse approached.

"And how's the filthy puppet?" he asked pleasantly. His smile faded to a frown of concern, however, at the anxious look on the nurse's face. "What's wrong now? Is the girl all right?" He placed his tools on the bench and got to his feet.

"Oh sir!" the nurse exclaimed. " You really must come with me....you really must see." The woman was so distracted that she began to pull on his arm. "Please sir, you must come and see."

The old man took her hand from his arm and gently held her shoulders, looking her squarely in the eye. "Is the girl all right?" he asked slowly.

"Oh my, yes sir!" the nurse nodded her head foolishly. "That's just it sir and you really must come or it's my job!" He couldn't tell if she was excited or frightened. He turned to his apprentice, for that is what the young man had become. "Mind the shop 'til I'm back." he instructed. Removing a leather apron and rolling down his sleeves he began to walk with the nurse.

"Now start at the beginning and tell me why I must come" he said.

"Well sir, " she began to calm as she talked " It all started the day we got the young lady home.."

And so a fascinating story unfolded. Apparently the girl had argued with her nurse until she was allowed to keep the puppet in her bed with her. At some point she was bound to grow weary of the toy and it could be cleaned and hung on the wall. But that wasn't to be the case. It was by her side constantly.

Now as if that wasn't enough, one day the nurse actually heard the child humming and singing to herself when she passed her room. When she slowed to peek in she was startled to see the child sitting up in bed and singing to the puppet. She hurried in to settle the child, but she merely laughed at the poor woman and began to dance the puppet in her lap.

Today, however, was really too much. The nurse had never seen anything like it. The child was not well, and apparently not expected to ever be well. Her strength had to be carefully conserved. Over exertion might kill her. The nurse was sure of it. And then what would become of the nurse. So, she thought the old man might be able to reason with the child.

"I mean the child actually got out of bed sir, and walked to the window seat. And there she sits still, dancing that dirty little puppet you gave her." The nurse stopped and looked up at the old man. "If anything happens to her and I lose my job," she shook her finger under his nose, "I'll hold you responsible." She began to walk again. "So you'd best fix this once and for all!"

The carriage ride from the village was short enough, but the nurse never stopped nattering at the old man about his filthy puppet costing her her job. He ignored her and stared out the window, his thoughts on the child.

When they arrived at the estate, for that's what it was, they went straight up to a suite of rooms specially designed for the child and her nurse. As they approached the double doors of the little girls room the old man could hear her singing. He shushed the still muttering nurse and stooped to peek through the key hole. With a start he pulled back from the door and turned on the nurse.

"Woman!" He hissed through his teeth, "what have you done?"

He turned and tore open both doors as he strode into the room. Startled the child stood a moment, frozen in mid step of a dance. The nurse stood staring a moment and crumpled to the ground in a faint. The little girl smiled and ran to the old man, throwing her arms around him.

"I'm so glad you've come." she murmured into his chest.

The old man picked her up, stepped over the nurse and carried the child to the window seat.

"Hush child" he cradled her in his lap and gently eased the puppet from her hands. "and I'm glad I've come"

The old man rocked the child in his arms and gazed over her head at the face of the puppet. He stiffened in anger and then forced himself to relax. It couldn't be the child's doing. It had been done by a master. The face was completely changed. All trace of sadness had vanished. Instead, the little puppet wore a smile that could light up the darkest night. Its eyes fairly sparkled with the suggestion of a merry soul hiding within.

"So tell me," he began carefully, "who repainted the little fellows face?"

The little girl giggled and looked up at the old man. "Why no one of course!"

The old man tried to laugh along, but it was difficult. "Come now," he chided her, "This isn't the face he had when he left my shop. What happened?"

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The little girl gently held the puppet up for both of them to see. She became very serious as she began her explanation.

"Well, you see, when I came to your shop and saw him on the wall," she said, " he looked at me as though he was the first one who ever understood how I felt." She looked up at the old man. "I know he's just made of wood and cloth, but I couldn't leave him. And the more I saw of his sadness, the less lonely I felt." She looked back at the puppet and smiled "til I wasn't lonely or scared anymore. ... and somehow," She turned back to the old man, "that made me stronger and stronger." She laughed

"But what about his face?" the old man urged.

"Well, I guess," she began, "when you love someone the way the puppet loves me," she paused and chewed at her lip thoughtfully "and you make them strong, it must feel awfully good." She turned and smiled triumphantly up at the old man, "so how could he feel sad anymore?"

The child rested her head against the old mans shoulder again and cradled the puppet in her lap. The three of them gazed out the window into that distance that's somewhere between now and forever and smiled softly, the old man with tears sparkling in his eyes.

THE TOWER:

The old woman pushed the logs deeper into the fire and gazed into the flames, a child curled in her lap. Stone walls of a great hall vanished into the dark behind her. The child sniffled and snuggled deeper.

Hush child, the woman murmured, and I'll tell you what it is to be alone. Her eyes looked beyond flames to a time long gone.

In this land there is a fortress unlike any other. Huge and built of the very bones of the earth, it will, no doubt, stand forever. High thick walls and battlements are approached only across great earth dikes and deep moats. There's room enough within the walls to shelter a small farm. Once there was such a farm. This fortress could have withstood any attack; any siege until the attacker wasted away from age and hunger. I believe there was even a spring that bubbled up within the walls and fed the moat.

It's a strange thing; then, that the walls never carried a warrior and the great drawbridges that opened each of the great walls were never pulled up. Within the walls, there was always much food and drink available to any that came there. The hearths were always well loaded with hard woods, bread was always coming fresh from the ovens, and there was never a shortage of meat and ale. Fine wines filled the cellars and graced the long wooden tables in the main hall. Always there were people coming to this fortress, often weary and sad, who soon became merry with song and stories. Laughter and dancing were not an uncommon occurrence either. And fresh hay and linen was readily available to make soft dry pallets for nightfall. It was a wonderful place.

In the back corner of the fortress was a tall tower with a single doorway and balcony 100 feet up from the ground. There was no other access. Many would wonder, briefly, at this, but soon would drift off to enjoy the comfort and company of the main hall and its many courtyards.

It was often hard to determine who actually lived in this place, there were so many coming and going. Guests were as likely to lay out new food and drink as any servant. Used dishes and food scraps never lingered long. Any one might lead a song or start a dance. Stories would be recited by any with a tale to tell. Some, I'm sure, stayed in that place for many days, even months. No doubt it was a hard place to leave.

There was one, however, who was always there. Tall, graceful she greeted all comers and made them welcome. She listened to their stories, refilled their glasses and was familiar to all. Yet none gave thought to who she was or why she was, much less where she went. She didn't sleep in the hall with the others. Each day she would reappear, in fresh robes, smelling of clean grass and spring water, maybe a breath of blossoms lingering about her long curling hair. Her presence became as accepted as the fortress and both became a refuge known throughout the land. Perhaps this openness was the best defense available.

One morning early, however, an old man looked up and saw this woman standing on the tower balcony and he became exceedingly curious. He watched as she turned into the doorway and vanished into the tower. He waited, but she didn't reappear. Losing interest he turned back to the activities of the waking hall. Moments later she was at his side asking him had he slept well, did he need anything. Baffled he said all was well, but he had to ask her, "was that you I saw in the tower?"

"Why yes," she smiled, "it's where I live"

"How could you live in such a cold dark place?" he asked.

She laughed softly, a certain sadness in her eyes. "You are kind sir, but in truth it is you and all these," she gestured at all around them "who live in cold and darkness. If you would come in you would see how much vaster is my home than this poor hall and keep."

"How could it be vaster than that which surrounds it?" he asked.

How can I tell? The walls do not limit nor the floor cut short. Inside are colours that cannot find room to live out here in this poor space. Sound is a joyous living thing and living is not restricted to a narrow walk through a blind wormhole in time. The sheer jubilation of being there would most likely reduce here and now to ashes and darkness. It would be too much for your up down and through.

He looked at her strangely "But there is no door. Why and how do you come and go?"

She turned and smiled with the light of first gleaming after a storm. "Once I tasted what it might be to feel flesh and blood arms around me. I tasted the cool hot wet of a human kiss. I hungered, from then on, to find one who could embrace my all being and taste to the depths of my living. I believed I could have the totality of my reality with the humanity and earthy passion of yours. I come and go easily, as there is a door, just over there. I come and go because I wait for one who knows."

He looked to the tower and then back. His eyes told her he thought her quite mad and he backed away in discomfort.

"I see no door."

She looked at him a moment then turned to gaze at her tower. "I know" she sighed.

The old woman sat quietly stroking the child's hair and staring into the fire.

"But gran," the child looked up, "what happened then?"

"Oh child," the old woman replied, "the woman lived and cared in this castle, as I've told you, for longer than anyone might remember."

“But why gran? Why didn’t she go home?” The sleepy child rubbed a runny nose with a grubby fist and wiped the remains of tears from heavy eyes.

“Because she knew, believed, there would someday be the one who knew. Because she had tasted the fullness of both worlds. Who can say?”

“I hope she didn’t have to wait too long” the child yawned.

“Can you stay awake long enough to hear the rest?” The old woman tickled the child gently.

“Please gran ...”

The woman continued to care for all who came to the castle for a very long time. She thought often of simply retreating to the tower, but every day, she found herself drawn back to this world. She loved and enjoyed her guests, and began to accept this double life, but the hunger for one who knew remained firmly planted deep within her heart. She tried, again and again, to convince herself it was of no significance. Tried to believe that this life was not only all she could have, but all she wanted. A bird may as well have tried to believe it didn’t care to fly again.

One day, a day which started like so many before it, she saw a man enter one of the gates to the castle keep. He seemed, at first glance, to be quite ordinary, so he drew her attention only briefly. She met him and made him welcome, then turned to attend to her other guests. But he was no ordinary visitor. He watched. He watched the woman, her castle, her guests, everything. And he knew.

As the day came to an end the woman made her way back to the tower. Her guests were busy with feasting and music, and seldom took notice. No one ever had. Except this time. The new arrival, with soft white curls and piercing blue eyes saw her progress through the crowd. And he watched. She spoke to this person and that, straightened a rug, collected plates, touched here and there, laughed at a joke, joined in a song, and moved to her tower oblivious to his attention. He followed.

She didn’t pause or look back when she entered the door at the tower’s base. But as she moved about in her own world, she felt a presence behind her and turned. There behind her waited the stranger. He smiled and looked around him.

“This place of yours is beautiful. Why do the others stay away?”

She watched him for a moment before answering.

“What do you see?” she asked.

He looked around and laughed in gentle wonder at her question. “Why everything of course!”

“The others,” she moved away slowly, drifting in thought before she looked up at him again. “They can’t even see the door.”

“What door?”

“The one we came through.” She stopped and turned to face him.

“I saw no door. Only you and this place. The castle is certainly comfy and well provisioned, but how could one miss this bright and living space here?” He reached out and touched her hand, drawing her closer. “I’ll show you.” He turned with her to look where they had come, and the walls and the door were gone. The castle remained, but seemed distant and no longer in need of much attention.

So she turned to him again and looked into his eyes, touched his face, and saw all that he was. And it was more than the sum of all the guests she had ever known. She saw a depth of being and knowing that reached across both worlds, encompassing all that she was, without fear or doubt. And she felt herself opening and expanding to experience all that he was, without fear or sadness. And all that had been in her life was changed and set free. All that she would be became possible and she knew a peace and happiness that defied expression.

“But gran,” the child murmured, “Did he stay? What does it mean?”

“Oh child,” the old woman smiled secretly into the fire, “It didn’t matter if he stayed or left. She loved him and was set free. Without effort, he knew her. Without effort she knew him. And in the knowing was such a clear and simple loving, that it knew no limits, neither of distance nor of time. And she didn’t need to wait anymore. And she didn’t need to wonder if anyone would ever know her. The castle remained, but she spent little time attending to its guests and they didn’t really notice. Perhaps he’s there with her, still, in the tower. No one can say. She was found by him and is finally free, to be, and to love him for as long as she has heart soul and mind to feel and think.”

“But won’t she be sad if he goes?”

“No matter how far he goes, or for how long, he will be a part of her world. The gift he has brought can’t be withdrawn. He’s not bound or burdened, but free to follow his own path. He’ll never hurt her, but if his path takes him on, all that he’s done and given will remain a part of who and how she is. And she is very happy. This won’t change. It would be easier to push a butterfly back in to a caterpillar or a chick back into the egg. Easier to demand a bird walk instead of fly. She’s been changed and there will be no going back.”

“I hope he stays.”

*“She knows he’ll do whatever he needs to do to continue being the one who knows her.
And she isn’t afraid.”*

“Is he?”

“That’s another story.”

The Golden Horn

In a time before even I can remember, and I'm terribly old, the world was without colour. Everything was white, black, gray and silver and beauty was different than it is today. Imagine gray roses that smelled as though they ought to be soft pink or deep red, or fresh cut grass the colour of cardboard.

In this time of no colour there was a village near a forest, which of course was gray, silver, white and black. In the village there lived a child who loved to go to the forest every day, after school and chores, to play. The child, whose name was Dayna, knew all the paths and secret places of the forest and had many adventures in the leaves and shadows. Even in black, gray, white and silver a forest is still a magical place to play.

The forest was ancient and full of deep, good magic and it knew Dayna as well as she knew the forest. The forest had waited for someone like her for a long time and the leaves almost rustled in excitement every time she came to play.

One day Dayna was singing happily and following a favorite trail when something bright sparkled through the bracken on the forest floor. She came closer, being careful because you can never be too sure of the things you find in a forest, and gently pushed the ferns and leaves aside. There she saw the most beautiful silver horn she had ever seen.

Dayna looked around to see if the owner of the horn was nearby. It was so beautiful, she couldn't imagine someone had simply thrown it away, but there was no one around. Dayna still wasn't sure she should even touch the horn, so she waited.

The day started to move very slowly while Dayna waited, so she thought she'd better build a little shelter around the horn, just in case no one came and it began to rain. Gently she built a little house of twigs and leaves around and over the horn, careful not to touch it. It was someone else's horn and they would surely be back soon.

The day came to an end and still no one had come to claim the horn. Dayna was worried, but the little house would have to do for now. She sighed and made her way home, sure that the horn would be gone by morning.

The next day dawned bright and clear and Dayna could hardly hear what was said in school, she was so worried about the horn. She raced through her chores and ran into the forest.

She danced with delight when she found the horn was still there, safe and dry in its little house. She was a good girl and knew someone must own the horn, so again she decided to wait. This time she would build a shelter for herself. Someone would come by and claim the horn before long and maybe they would play it for her before they took it away.

But no one came. Sadly Dayna went home again that evening, even more sure that the horn would be gone the next day. This went on for several days until Dayna couldn't

stand it anymore. One afternoon, after school and chores, she decided to take the horn home for safekeeping and leave a note in a bottle. She carefully wrote her note and in it promised to bring the horn to the same spot in the forest every day. In case she forgot or was sick, she wrote down where she lived. Satisfied she stuffed the note in the bottle and headed in to the forest.

As she approached the shelters she had made Dayna again began to worry that the horn was gone, but as she came closer she saw the silver sparkle through the leaves. She felt almost shy when she finally reached down to pick it up. It was so beautiful. She ran her fingers over the smooth shiny surface and smiled at her funny reflection in the curved silver. The metal was surprisingly warm and she hugged it gently for a moment. The forest breathed a gentle sighing breeze of contentment.

Dayna held the horn out to look at it again. Something like this really ought to be played, she thought to herself. How hard would it be, she wondered, to learn how? Would anyone mind? She looked around and giggled to herself before putting the mouthpiece to her lips. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and began to blow, gently at first and then with more confidence.

A soft gentle whispering came first and the leaves around Dayna shivered with a dry rustle. Dayna opened her eyes in wonder as she blew harder. The music that poured out was beautiful! It filled her all up and flowed out like sunshine. She opened her eyes wide and paused to draw a new breath. Then she began to blow again, this time with a steady even breath. As she blew she looked up at the treetops and almost dropped the horn. Everywhere the leaves and branches were changing from white, black, silver and gray to the most wonderful shades. It was like nothing she had seen before and she certainly had no words to describe it. The world around her, as long as she blew on the horn, was turning to colour! When she stopped, in amazement, everything slowly faded back to white, black, gray and silver. She moved from the glade and began to play again. It was wonderful! The horn itself had changed from bright silver to something shiny warm and rich, like warm sand on a summer beach or hay before mowing. The pretty little white flowers along the path were all different sunshiny colours. The Earth beside the path was some deep rich warm shade. She tilted her head back as far as she could while she played and looked through the leaves to the sky. The light made the leaves glow a wonderful, alive, colour and the sky beyond shimmered with a promise of something deep and huge beyond. It was so hard to see all this, keep walking and continue to play the horn. She tripped and stumbled from time to time, and paused to catch her breath, but the forest gently moved its branches roots and vines out of her way and whispered a soft breeze to keep her company. The waiting was over and the magic was free.

Dayna made her way to the village, stopping to play for a tree or a brook, even a rabbit by the path. They all turned the most wonderful assortment of colours, though that wasn't the word she used. There were no words yet that would work. When she came close to the village she stopped playing and tried to hide the horn in the folds of her skirt. What if everyone could see the music magic? As she walked through the streets that led to home, though, no one seemed to notice much of anything different.

When Dayna got home she wanted to hide the horn in her bed. She knew there would be lots of questions from her parents, and they would be hard questions for which she had no answers. Instead she lifted the horn free of her skirts, polished it a little and went to her father's workshop. She paused at the doorway, took a deep breath and walked in then waited quietly in the sunshine that flooded through from behind her.

Her father looked up from his workbench. "What have you got there child?" He asked quietly, not ceasing in his carving.

Dayna held the horn out so the sun sparkled on its silver shape. "It's a horn Dad. I found it in the forest." She waited.

He looked over his glasses at the horn. "Well made. Must belong to someone." He paused in his work and looked at Dayna.

"Yes Dad. I watched it for days and days and then when I took it I left a note." She waited again.

"Don't imagine you can play it eh?" He turned back to his work.

"Sort of." Dayna took a deep breath and put the horn to her lips. As soon as she began to blow, ever so gently, the music poured out and the workshop began to glow with colour. Her father gasped and dropped the wood he was working and his chisel fell to the floor. Dayna stopped and the room faded back to white, silver black and gray.

Her father left the workbench and came to stand by Dayna, reaching for the horn. "May I try?" he asked in wonder.

Dayna silently handed him the horn but when he put it to his lips and blew it only squeaked and squealed and there was no colour.

"Well I'll be." He muttered as he handed it back. "Did it do this the first time or have you been practicing out there in the forest?" He looked down over his glasses at his daughter again.

"First time Dad." She giggled a little in relief. It would be OK.

"Let's go show you Mom and your Gran." He took off his apron and the two of them walked back to the house.

Days and then weeks passed and Dayna traveled throughout the village playing the horn. As long as she played, wherever the beautiful music could be heard, the word was filled with colour and Dayna was very happy.

Word of this magic horn began to spread throughout the land and Dayna found herself asked to play for all kinds of people. Schools and churches, the sick and elderly, small

children, people at work or play, and more and more often people with too much money and not enough happiness. The music and the colour, you see, made people feel very, very happy even when they were sad or angry.

One day a messenger from the King arrived at Dayna's home with a full company of the King's own guards. All the villagers were excited. This was a big day for the village to have the King himself send a messenger so there was a great deal of running about and whispering from home to home and shop to shop. Maybe the King was going to reward Dayna for bringing such joy to everyone!

Dayna's father looked grim, though, as the messenger read the King's letter. Dayna was to accompany him to the King's castle that very day, with her horn, where she would only be allowed to play at the King's command. She had been declared a national treasure and would live in the tower with all the other treasures of the kingdom. She would have fine clothes, the best schooling and her family would be well taken care of, but she could only play at the King's command.

Dayna was frightened at this and her father grew angry. "The King has no right!" He shouted. "She is a child, my daughter, and cannot live with treasures!" He moved Dayna behind him and offered the horn to the messenger. "Take the horn for your treasures, but not my child."

The messenger signaled the King's guards and shook his head sadly. "We know your daughter is the only one who can play the horn," he said, "and the magic she possesses is too great to leave wandering the country side. Anyone might steal her away and then, who knows where she would end up?" He motioned the guards forward. "Please understand, we seek to protect the child as much as anything else, and had hoped to do this peacefully." He looked long at the father and waited.

Dayna's father had never considered the possibility that a stranger would steal his daughter, so he sadly agreed to send her to live in the castle. He watched her go with tears in his eyes and promised to visit her every week. It was a long journey, but he would come, with her mother as often as he could.

The King had prepared a beautiful set of rooms for Dayna, high in his treasure tower, and she had tutors for anything she wanted to learn. Even for things she didn't really want to learn. She had her very own pony, a lovely garden and all the toys she asked for were hers. Every day, however, she grew sadder. She missed her Dad and Mom, and the village, and she missed playing her horn. Now you see she could only play for the King and his guests and many of them didn't even know how to smile, let alone laugh or dance and sing when she played. The world still turned beautiful colours, and she had started to give them names, but the King's wizards were so busy analyzing the magic that they couldn't see the beauty. Her dad came every week with her Mom, as he had promised, but they were never allowed to go anywhere together or even to be alone. Dayna got so sad she stopped even wanting to play the horn.

One day, as she stood by her tower window, she looked down to the garden and saw the same flowers she had first seen change colour in the woods. A tear slowly rolled down her cheek and she sighed a huge, heavy sigh.

“I wish I could play my horn again, out there where anyone can listen,” Another tear slid down her cheek. “and see Dad and Mom.”

The air on the windowsill began to shimmer a little as she sighed again. “I’d give anything…” and no sooner had she said the words than a fairy appeared in the window.

The fairy laughed with a sound like tiny bells ringing “And what would you give to play the horn I made for you?”

Dayna jumped back in surprise then moved forward in wonder. “Why you are beautiful!” she exclaimed. The fairy bowed low and laughed again.

“And if you play for me, I will be still more beautiful! So I ask again, what would you give to play your horn again? It is yours you know.”

Dayna looked over to where the horn sat in a glass case and as she looked it vanished, only to reappear in her hands. “What do you mean?”

The fairy sat down in the windowsill and regarded Dayna happily. “I made that horn for you when the universe first thought of you, and it’s waited just for you ever since. So what would you give to have all your wishes come true? ”

Dayna only thought a moment, “Why anything I suppose.”

The fairy got up and began to pace in the window. “Ok, how about if you have to play the horn forever?”

“I could do that.” She answered. “It brings so much beauty and happiness.”

“And if no-one could see you?” the fair paused and looked at Dayna carefully.

“Oh.” Dayna thought for several moments. “I don’t think I’d like that. I mean I’d like people to somehow know I was there. It makes it, I don’t know, friendlier I guess.”

The fairy laughed and danced a little dance. “So be it!” and in a twinkling Dayna and the horn were transformed to a most beautiful bird with feathers of every colour in the rainbow. She jumped to the windowsill and stood a moment by the fairy, then opened her long golden beak. The most beautiful music in the world poured out over the land around the tower. Dayna spread her new, glorious wings and flew out in to the world, singing the whole time. Fast as sunrise she flew to her father and mother, colour pouring over all the land behind her as she flew. Her father looked up, weary and sad, from his workbench, and knew in an instant that it was Dayna. He called joyfully to his wife and they danced

together in the sunlight while Dayna sang. Somehow they knew. Perhaps they had always known. Parents can be like that. Perhaps the fairy told them. Finally Dayna circled three times and flew off into the afternoon sky, singing all the while, and her parents waved goodbye wishing her joy and happiness. For they knew she was very, very happy again.

But that's not all! If you listen very carefully today you can still hear Dayna singing somewhere in the world and that's why we still have colour! Listen carefully the next time it rains, or children laugh. Listen to the waves on a beach or a brook over stones. Put your head on your father's chest and hear his strong steady heartbeat or listen to your mother hum you a lullaby with your ear to her shoulder. The song is everywhere. Maybe if you watch carefully, someday, you'll even see her. A beautiful rainbow bird with a long golden beak that sings for you, sings for me, sings for the joy of everyone.

The White Pony

(in progress)

There was a boy once, a child much like you, who lived in a stone cottage by the sea. Beside the cottage ran a clear bright river and behind it was a great field. Beyond the field towered a snow covered mountain while close beside cottage and field was an ancient forest. Toby, for that was his name, shared a loft each night with his brother and sister where they slept on a fresh straw pallet, wrapped in warm quilts made by their mother. They would drift to sleep each night to the gentle murmur of the sea outside, the wind and night noises of the forest and the murmured conversation of their parents below.

Every morning the three children would sit with their mother to learn the words and ways of the world. They learned to read and write, do sums and feel if a ewe was ready to lamb. They learned how to grind grain and make the dough for soft sweet bread, how to milk a goat and make cheese, how to stitch a strong and even seam, how to sing the garden along and how to read the sea and the clouds. Most of the time they hardly knew it was a lesson, there was so much laughter and song. But still they learned.

Every afternoon they worked side by side with their father and mother in the garden and the fields behind the cottage. Sometimes they would go out in their father's boat to fish and sometimes they would pass the time in their father's shop, helping as they could, learning to mend a plow, shape a chair, sharpen a scythe or mend nets. Sometimes their father would lead them into the forest to gather mushrooms, berries or fiddle-heads and sometimes just to explore. Each child had special chores and the evening couldn't begin until all had finished the day's work.

When the time came the lamps were lit, the table set and fresh bread, cheese and soup laid out. Thick cold milk was poured, fresh from a stone bowl by the icy spring in the cellar beneath the house. Every evening, when Toby was sure he would faint from hunger, their father would finally call them to the table. He would wait patiently for silence and would then reflect in simple words on the bounty and joy that was theirs, their mother whispering a soft echo in the lamplight. Their hunger lightened, the meal would then begin.

Conversation flowed easily in the evening and when supper was done, the dishes cleaned and wood added to the fire their father might bring down his fiddle and their mother might sing a song or tell a story til sleepy heads began to nod and it was time for bed.

Toby was a boy who loved to be alive, outdoors and in motion. Whenever he could finish his chores early he would head in to the forest or take his little boat out onto the river or the sea. There he would live out great adventures, explore hidden worlds and savour the full joys of childhood. His parents had taught him well and the sea and the forest were his friends.

One day Toby's brother and sister were building a fort of driftwood at the beach and asked him to join in. He was more interested in exploring alone that day, though, so he packed himself a small picnic and told his mother he was off to the forest.

The sunlight found a scattered path through the leaves overhead and lit up sudden patches of soft green in the forest floor. The shadows in between made wonderful castles, dragons and giants which Toby was most content to track and pursue. He rode fallen logs and crawled into the sticky caves of blackberry canes to hunt down evil trolls and goblins. He found fairy circles and danced with the idea of pixies and elves. It was a glorious day.

In the middle of this adventure Toby caught a flicker of movement in the corner of his eye, which is a very hard place to catch anything clearly and completely. He stopped and waited, slowly turning his head to see what was there. His father had cautioned him many times about the wild things that lived in the forest.

"They don't want to hurt you son, but they won't try hard to help you either. They're wild things and you must leave them be. Watch them, enjoy them, but leave them be. That forest is their world and you are their guest."

Toby wasn't sure he understood, but he trusted his parents, so when something moved in the shadows of the forest he was very, very careful.

He remained perfectly still for the longest time until it moved again. Something white was hiding in a hollow full of tall ferns. Toby's legs began to ache from standing so still and his eyes to burn from staring into the shadows. Finally the shape moved into a patch of sunlight. It was a beautiful, white pony!

Toby was hard pressed to stay still, but he didn't want the pony to run away. Moving very slowly he reached into his pocket for the apple from his picnic. This should do the trick, he thought to himself as he slowly extended the apple in an open hand. The pony froze and watched Toby carefully. Neither of them moved for a while. Finally the pony came forward shyly. As it approached he saw that it was very thin with ribs showing through its pearly white coat. It moved on shaky legs and seemed very eager to get to the apple. Toby didn't move.

First the soft nose of the pony touched his fingers then its warm breath kissed his palm as it picked up the apple. Slowly Toby reached up with his other hand to smooth the warm neck of the pony. It flinched a moment then enjoyed the apple with Toby's hand resting gently on its soft white coat. In no time the apple was gone and the pony was nuzzling Toby's empty hand for more. He forgot that this was a wild thing and stroked its neck and shoulder whispering gently as it pushed at his hand.

"Sorry fella, but I only brought one apple." He laughed as the pony pushed him gently, demanding more. "I could bring some feed and water, but you'd have to wait here." The pony shook its white head and pawed the bracken on the forest floor with a delicate hoof.

Toby laughed and scratched between its ears where a long silky forelock fell to deep blue eyes. "Don't worry, I'll be back." He gave a last scratch and turned to go.

The pony hesitated a moment and watched Toby walk away then seemed to make up its mind and began to follow. It was weak and faltered as it went. When Toby stopped to look back he could see its distress and returned to the pony's side. "Poor thing," he murmured, "You're all but starved. You must have lost your dam." He gently stroked the sides of the pony and thought what to do. His mother wouldn't think twice. It was a creature in need and that was enough. His father was another matter. This was a creature of the forest, a wild one. He wasn't to interfere. Toby thought some more and began to walk slowly towards home with the pony. His mind was making its own choice. He just had to come up with a good reason. Something would come to him.

By the time Toby had reached the cottage he still had found no answer. As he approached his father looked up from a block of wood he was carving on the front porch.