

RED POPPIES

By
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The woman was already beginning to get old, and she lived daily with sorrow because she had no child. She saw the sky and the earth grow young each spring, saw fish multiply in the water and birds in the air. Streets and houses were full of children, and only her house was without their cries and laughter.

Grieving, the woman lay down and dreamed that in the fields the poppies bloomed. The sky was clear and cold in her dream, no one was about, only poppies more red and billowy than she had ever seen them.

“Look, some of them are ripe!” the woman cried, and gathered a huge sheaf of the pods on their stalks. I can take them home, she thought, and flew away with them in her arms. Over her was the sky, beneath her feet the field of waving poppies, red and endless. She did not ask how it was that she was flying, or where it would take her. She flew, free of fear, free of her body” weight. Suddenly she heard a cry.

“Don’t squeeze us so?”

“Who said that?” The woman looked around, she looked down, but there was no one there.

Could I have imagined it, she wondered. But the same cry came again. The woman turned toward the sound and saw, coming from the pods in her arms, the tiny, tiny heads of children. One by one they came out of the pods, unfurled little red wings and flew to the ground. There was already a swarm of them, but the woman snatched in vain as she tried to grasp at least one. They skimmed lightly over her fingers, fluttered off and disappeared. One last pod was still unbroken. Then that burst too and three pairs of bright eyes looked out at the woman. The faces shone like little suns, eyes sparkled, and the woman sighed. If only one of them were mine, she thought, and held out her hand to stop them but these three also slipped out of her fingers and flew away.

Over the poppy field, as far as the eye could see, the flock of tiny laughing children gamboled and played. Their laughter rang out to tantalize her as they flew over her head. The woman swooped about in the

air, trying to overtake one of the tiny things, but the faster she flew, the faster the children escaped. Finally they were all gone and nothing met her eye but the empty sky and the waving red poppies, down on the ground. The woman cried out in disappointment and woke herself up. A tear ran down her cheek. She was raising her hand to wipe it away when a whispery voice said,

“Let me be. I want to do it by myself!”

“Who are you, and what is it you want to do by yourself?” The woman looked every which way but there was no one in the room.

“I am your son”, said the voice, and on the hand she had laid to her cheek, the woman felt a tiny, feathery weight. When she looked more closely, she saw a tear. All at once, the tear burst and out of it came a tiny, smiling little boy, bright and clear as dew. The woman jumped for joy, and then began at once to fret. What would a wee, shining creature like that eat? How could she shelter him from cold? She fed him all the most delicious things she could think of and wrapped him in the softest, warmest cloth to be found. The boy grew, but he always stayed fine and transparent as a dragonfly’s wing.

“He’ll get stronger”, the woman whispered to herself. “He will be very, very strong. Look how smart he is, how beautiful.” She proudly showed him to her relatives and friends, searching for a spark of amazement in their eyes at the sight of her child. But people turned away uneasily, shrugged their shoulders and went away without a word; the boy was only bright and beautiful to his mother. She had even begun to dream about the wondrous deeds he would do one day. After all, wasn’t he different from all other children, since he had been born of a tear?

But the little one was afraid of other children. When he was with them, at school or at play, he felt surrounded by giants. One day he began to cry and wouldn’t go to school anymore. Everyone teased him there and jostled him and laughed at him.

“I am not meant for school, Mother”, he said, hanging his head, but the woman was determined.

“Raise your head high and go”, she said firmly. “You are brighter and handsomer than all of them. If they shove you, shove back. If they hit, you hit.” The woman stroked the boy’s head, smoothed out the wrinkles in his coat, and watched him go down the street.

Hesitantly the boy walked off, hesitantly he returned the first blow. And wonder of wonders, the others backed away from him. The mocking

and the shoving stopped, but now as before, reading and writing were a real trial for the child. The teacher's words buzzed like flies around his ears; he heard them but he couldn't understand.

"Mother, I'll never learn all that", he said, and threw his book down in a rage. But his mother just picked it up and put it back in front of him.

"You can and you will. You can do anything. You were born of a tear." The woman drew the boy close, gazed into his eyes and smiled. "And don't you ever forget it!"

And the boy really did begin to read and write and understand the teacher. The wonders of the earth spread out before him like a great book written with love. What he understood best was the secrets of the herbs and the secrets of beautiful words, and he was convinced that any evil could be warded off by one of these or the other. Is it any wonder that people started coming to the boy born of a tear to find help in their illness and sorrow?

The boy became famous. He grew to young manhood, but he stayed wraithlike and small, as though it were only himself he could not help. Girls looked through him like glass, or past him. Not one of them smiled, not one held out her hand. The young men were even worse.

"You can't make a dragon out of a lizard", they scoffed. The boy began to curse his fate, and the mother lowered her eyes, knowing for the first time that she could not help. Then one morning she got up before dawn and went out into the world to find a cure for this misfortune.

"What shall I do, she asked the trees and the river and the stars and the frog. Where can I find happiness for my son?" she repeated without end, until her plaint reached the East Wind. He said,

"Your son must find his own happiness. You cannot search for it in his place. But climb to the Sunny Mountain and ask the Sun Mother for advice. If she does not know where your son's happiness is, no one will know."

The East raced after the clouds and the mother went to find the Sunny Mountain. No one knew where it was, so she kept on looking alone. Through briars and over stones, across glaciers and burning deserts, the woman went, with never a care for pain or hunger or thirst. And finally she reached her goal. There shimmered the Sunny Mountain, all made of living fire. Such heat flowed out of it that no human feet had ever walked there. But the woman was not afraid, paid no attention to the blaze that was

stripping the skin from her feet. She reached the peak of the mountain before the sun had risen out of the sea.

“Where do you come from, woman?” the Sun Mother raged. “Who brought you here? What do you want?”

“I have come here alone. I am searching for my son’s happiness.”

“That is something you cannot give him.” The Sun Mother shook her head sadly. “His happiness is with the star-eyed maiden, and the maiden is under a spell in the poppy field. If your son is to reach her, you must disappear. Until the earth gets once around the sun, you must throw fire into the sun furnace with your bare hands,” the Sun Mother said sternly. “You had better go back where you came from. The price for your son’s happiness is too high.”

The woman shook her head and thought. Then she said, “I will pay it!”

“Then know that you will never be with him again.”

“How shall I know he is happy?”

“You will see him.” There was a sorrowful sound in the Sun Mother’s voice. “But he will not see you. He will think you are dead, and in his happiness, he will forget about you. Do you still insist?”

“So be it.” The woman took a deep breath and with her bare hands seized the first firebrand. Oh how it burned, oh what pain! Bits of skin fell from her hands like the petals of the poppy. She watched them fall down to earth and turn to crimson poppy flowers, but never once did she cry out. Every day there were poppies, until they covered whole fields.

Like the flowers in my dream, thought the woman, and saw how one flower grew bigger than all the others. Out of this flower rose the maiden with the starry eyes, who smiled and set out on the eastward path the woman had once taken.

“Your service is ended!” The Sun Mother touched the woman’s shoulder. At this touch, she felt herself grow clear and light, the softest wisp of cloud. The East Wind carried her down the path up which the poppy girl had come. Gently, she sank further and further down into the valley until she saw her own familiar land and the house where she was born. Her son’s laughter came to her ears to tell her that the Sun Mother had not lied, and she began to tremble. She wanted to see her son, she had to, she had to.

And when that moment came, the woman could not believe her eyes. Could it be? Was this smiling lad the same weak, fearful child? The

mother cloud sank lower yet, to see. It really was her son. The mother cried for joy and the youth raised his head to see what he had felt. And wonder of wonders! Up in the clear blue sky, there hovered a sunlit, silver cloud from which fell drops of rain. As each drop reached the ground, it became a great red poppy. In a twinkling, the whole field around the young man's house was red, as though it were going up in flames. Filled with light, the cloud rested low over the earth and made it mild and calm. The winds tried to carry the cloud away but they could not: the cloud prevailed against the changing of the seasons and resisted the winds.

Sometimes at dawn and at twilight, people would see it dip down, so low it could peer in the window. Who knows? Maybe that is what it did, but maybe it just seemed that way. One thing is sure: nowhere in the world are the poppies so red, so luxuriant. Nor did anyone know more about the secrets of the herbs and grasses than the boy born of a tear.

Translated from Serbian by G. G. Champe