

The Wild Swans

The land was not far away, nor was the time long ago. The girl was not beautiful, but she was not ugly either. She was neither princess nor pauper.

There was no stepmother. There was her real mother, and her real father. These parents, though not king and queen, occupied positions of responsibility and authority in their coastal town, and were loved by many people who knew them through their public personalities.

It was one of those days in December between Christmas and New Year's. The girl found herself alone in the home of her parents, the home of her past and of her present. She was a high school student, but of course this was during the holidays. After his usual fashion, her father had departed before breakfast to begin his mysterious and important day at the office. Her many brothers, all older than she and all beloved, had by ten o'clock left the house for the day, after a breakfast punctuated by the sounds of boots stamping on the kitchen doormat, loud-voiced jokes, exclamations of pleasure and disdain, beeps from the microwave, the slamming of doors. Boy smells, boy exuberance. One brother had gone to play ice hockey with his college friends. Another had gone to practice in the band where he played the bass guitar. A third, after donning his heavy boots caked with red mud, left for his construction job.. Another took their mother to her office in City Hall so that he could use the car to visit his girlfriend in the next town for the day. And the last, the youngest and the one she loved the most, had gone to his volunteer job at the animal shelter where he would spend the day taking one or two dogs at a time for walks up and down the weedy, littered sidewalks that flanked the shelter's busy street.

The washing machine was broken, and the repairman was expected. Also expected was that she was the one who would stay home to wait for him. During the holidays, each of her

brothers had brought her their clothing that needed mending. There were trousers with knees to be patched and legs to be lengthened. There were missing buttons, torn cuffs, hopelessly frozen zippers, sweaters with moth holes, an overcoat with a large tear under one arm. Their mother was not a seamstress; rather, she was fond of saying that she had no patience with the tiny eyes of needles.

During the grayish morning, the girl who was not a princess worked on one garment and then another in the dining room. For company, she had the view from the French doors that lined the back of the large brick house. The lawn and then the marsh grasses gave way on the horizon to one of the large North Carolina sounds, a muted green and brown palette under the low winter sky.

She was a self-taught seamstress. As she worked, the needles jabbed her fingers or snapped in half when she pushed them into the heavy folds of denim or corduroy. The thimble she used in sewing on buttons had a tiny hole that her needle found so frequently that she got up several times to rinse bright drops of blood from the white shirt she was working on. Soon the tips of her fingers were sore. Yet the sewing machine, old and neglected, was no better. It snarled the thread into unsightly wads and its seams could not be counted on.

Solitude had brought silence. The note she left at noon on the front door contained the first words she had used that day: "Back soon. Please wait for me." She walked a short distance through the neighborhood to borrow some navy blue thread from a neighbor whom she believed would be home during the day. The afternoon air was thick and cold over the placid rows of homes. Only the camellias were in bloom, and spent blossoms left bright red and pink blotches on the neatly mulched borders. On the curbs lay some of the season's evergreen trees whose brief splendid days had passed.

She rang the doorbell of the house she was seeking. Voices inside and the briefest delay before the door opened. The neighbor seemed surprised to see her, and her words of greeting were delayed as she took in the girl's appearance. Over her shoulder, the girl saw several other women seated together at a card table in the living room. She voiced the reason for her visit.

"Of course. Come in, dear," her mother's friend said, yet a smirk in her voice gave the lie to her polite words. The girl stepped into the foyer and put a hand to her hair. It was rough and uncombed. Her sweater was stained and she wore a pair of her brother's outgrown trousers. The women at the table glanced at each other. One of them asked her what grade she was in. She gave a brief reply and then waited beside the front door until the hostess reappeared with the thread.

"No need to return it, dear," the woman said. "I'm sure you need it more than I do."

The girl hastened home, fearing she had missed the repairman, but as she approached the house, she saw the white patch of her note still on the front door. More hours passed while she repaired and rebound the buttonholes on a navy pea jacket. They emerged lumpy and unsettled on the thick wool, but at least the thread was the right color.

The light was beginning to fade as the afternoon sank toward four o'clock when she heard the repairman's truck in the driveway. She watched the man emerge and approach the house, leaning to one side as he carried a large tool kit in one hand.

He removed his cap when she answered the door, and he called her "ma'am" in greeting. His face had a steady, yet lighthearted look, and he had the soft lips of a boy. Something in his expression came together and settled as his eyes rested on her face.

She led him through the dining room, past the clothes scattered on the furniture, the broken strands of thread in many colors on the carpet. The washing machine lived in a little room

next to the kitchen. She stood aside to let him pass, and a distinct fragrance followed him, an outdoor smell of something clean and freshly gathered. The girl watched him maneuver the washer away from the wall and remove its back, disclosing the secret system of wheels and gears that gave the machine its life and usefulness. The man's hands were large, with long, strong-looking fingers.

In just a few minutes the man had identified the problem. It would require a new part, he said, but the machine was well-made and had many years of life still in it. He would order the part and return next week. The girl nodded and picked at a stain on her sweater while he collected his tools.

At the door, he gave her his card and said he would telephone when it was time to return. She was turning to set the card on the front hall table when he spoke again.

“Ma’am?” It was a question, and she raised her eyes to his face. “Your name?” His eyes were dark and watchful. In one of them a triangular patch of lighter brown in the iris gave the small surprise that rendered beauty.

She held out her hand for his pen, wrote a single word on the back of the card and showed it to him. He nodded and closed the door behind him.

The girl moved to the French doors and stood looking east. It was near dusk, and the live oaks stretched their long shadows across the lawn. In the distance were faint, familiar notes – the clear, high-pitched woo-hoo of the tundra swans that made the inland bays of North Carolina their winter home. Where the marsh met the sound, a fluid wedge-shaped flock approached and settled on the water.

The girl watched the wavering white line of swans for a few minutes. Far out, there would be the rustling of great wings, the throaty swan mutterings of settling and recognition, the

strong webbed feet at work in the cold water, the well-earned rest as night fell. At last she turned back to the darkening house behind her. She turned on every lamp in the living and dining rooms. She chose a needle and carefully threaded it, then reached for the overcoat with the hole in one arm. Her youngest brother's. She reached inside the sleeve to discover the extent of the tear. It was large; her hand came easily all the way through. The lining was badly frayed along the seam, and the outer wool showed signs of earlier unsuccessful repair. Work for hands more skilled than hers. Or perhaps for no one's.

She set the coat aside and returned to the foyer to find the repairman's card. The outdoor scent she had noticed earlier lingered there. She held the card to her face and drew a deep, generous breath, taking in the fragrance of pine needles and marsh grass and the open water where the swans had gathered for the night.