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What Does One Poisoned Fruit Say to Another? Eat Me.

Josephina Levin

Whittle away at the story: shed the pink skin and bare its bones to the open air. Snow White is white yes, but also red. Red in the blood spilled, hearts cleaved from open chests, the robin red breasts taking flight. While a single story “never occurs in its pure form,” it can be “derived from a comparison of many individual tales”. There are two tales to tell here. One was orally compiled throughout nineteenth century Germany and the other, born in contention with the first, in the Chicago suburbs in the December of 1999. Between them they share two sides of an apple, red and white. Neither begins with the birth of so called Snow White. Before that, a woman sat with her needlework, wishing for a daughter. She pricked her finger and “thought to herself, ‘If only I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood in this frame’”. Another woman, in another iteration, was more of a knitter. She sat on her porch, stuffy towers not her style, and stared into the open blue sky. She still desperately wanted a child (son, daughter, she already had both. She wasn’t picky) and she still pricked her finger (broke both her elbows, big difference). Regardless of circumstance, Snow White was born of her mother’s want for her. All in accordance with the cracks in the barest bones of an old story.

Though not proclaimed by a fairy upon her birth, there was a spell placed upon Snow White. It needn't have been supernatural in origin to grip those who hear its whisper in the old tale. “The strange spell that is cast by folktales does not derive simply from their otherworldly motifs”, instead it comes to fruition from very human, but no less dangerous, folly. Maybe her mother died or her father left, either way Snow White grew up in a broken home. Like any curse worth its salt, this one took its time rooting into her life. “Snow-White grew up and became ever more beautiful. When she was seven years old she was as beautiful as the light of day”; when a different Snow White was seven, the trees were bare and sleeping and her skin was pale and her lips were bleeding. She was so white that the boy behind her in class held a piece of paper up to her bare arm and couldn’t tell where she ended, and the depthless bleach began. And to accompany her rapidly paling, or rather beauty blossoming, skin were those blood red lips. Blood red, named for the blood rushing to the surface when she bit the chap of them. It was in the

spell, the cold that closed her pores, stilled her childish movements, and softened the beat of her heart till it could scarcely be heard through her rib cage.

In the ninth grade, Snow White wore tight leggings and a soft gray tank top out into the street with her friends. When her mother's car pulled up in front of them, the woman jumped out and grabbed her daughter. All the way home she tells Snow White all about the dangers of being seen. "Your body is public property," she didn't say. Snow White understood regardless. Beauty belongs to men, or at least the beauty of the hairless, precious, thoughtless variety does, and Snow White and her beauty are inseparable. A prince sees no difference between possessing her frozen corpse and marrying her breathing body. "I cannot live without being able to see Snow-White. I will honor her and respect her as my most cherished one," he said. That kind of beauty does not inspire pity, but greed. In the version of this tale where her mother doesn't die, she instead said, once, twice, a thousand times, by the light of a fire, "normally babies are ugly, but you were different. You were beautiful. And because you were beautiful, everyone wanted to steal you away." It is a memory stained with pride and fear and love and grief, lying atop each other as they often do in the minds of girls who grow up beautiful. And Snow White grew up beautiful, she must have, with all the people telling her so. Likewise, she grew up cursed.

With no indicated reason, the spell stuck to Snow White more as she aged. In the summers she used to look like every other kid, all smiles and sun-soaked skin, blisters rolling over her swollen lips. Now the absence of color was all encompassing. White seeped into her eyes, blanketing over her vision. She saw specks of color behind them, soon blanketed in snow of her own making. Her lips stung against the air. She applied Chapstick by the metric ton, the sting only growing. A curse needs no explanation, "all that is important is that the persons are enchanted and must be disenchanting. Who cursed them and why - these matters are beside the point". Snow White grew so white, a doctor prescribed four bottles of pills to supplement her color and listed off the twenty deficiencies she accrued from a life avoiding that poison. She could not just avoid the apple, after all. Poison spreads. It went from apples to oranges to grapes to the gallon of milk in the refrigerator door above them. It spread so far she stopped opening the door at all. She stopped going to the kitchen.

So, Snow White grew, whiter and redder until the introduction of a poisoned fruit to her diet. It's hard to remember which one was the inciting fruit. History would point to the apple. And while once it would have been easy to tell, for "the apple had been so artfully made that only the red half was poisoned. Snow-White longed for the beautiful apple, and when she saw that the peasant woman was eating part of it she could no longer resist", a Snow White who knew of the danger from stories of her own would not be so

easily tricked. Her mother warned her about the crab apples growing on the neighbor's tree, but Snow White found out later they weren't poison at all. "They weren't good for you anyway," her mother said in defense of the lie. It makes a kind of twisted sense: if poison never killed Snow White back then, then maybe everything that doesn't kill her now is also a poison.

What was it with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? That they bit into the forbidden fruit and found themselves naked and ashamed? Well Snow White took a bite into beauty and found herself sleeping. In that sleep, she became that beauty to be bitten. "We cannot bury her in the black earth," the seven dwarfs would say, "and they had a transparent glass coffin made, so she could be seen from all sides". Another time, she was in a dreamlike state, feverish out of her mind, away from home and in tears. Laying in an unfamiliar bed an unfamiliar woman stroked her hair and saying "Don't cry. You're too beautiful to cry." For reasons she didn't know, this only made her cry harder. A boy kissed her once, well she kissed him, well she tried to kiss him and she hit his eye with her nose and even with their lips in the proper placement, she thought "this isn't right." That kiss didn't wake her. The one that did occur two years later. The other girl tasted timid and excited and girlish and Snow White said "I love you. I love you so much." Because she kissed when she said it, it became true. A kiss, a real kiss, is powerful; it can cast a spell or break one, as the case may be.

Here's where real life and stories diverge, at the end. The real difference between my and that of Snow White, indeed "the secret power of the folktale" itself, "lies not in the motifs it employs but in the manner in which it uses them - that is, in its form"¹. Beauty is not what they told her it was, in stories. What happens when Snow White grows up, what happens when her own beauty is surpassed? The prince loved her rosy cheeks not the growing bags below her eyes. Perhaps the story is cyclical, when being told of the depth of "a beautiful woman, but she was proud and arrogant, and she could not stand it if anyone might surpass her in beauty"? Maybe once, but not now. Snow White gets ugly. She cuts off all her hair, stops smiling at men on the train, starts cursing and wearing leather. "You're scaring me" everyone thinks but doesn't say. Snow White is glad. Even the barest bones of a story can twist unexpectedly.

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