

Sweet Oil

Synopsis

“ Grandmother said once upon a time in a faraway land there was a magic princess who lived happily ever after” is the archetypal line that structures this collection of reconfigured fairytales. *Sweet Oil* commences with *Grandmother Said* which frames the narrators return to her childhood home on a West Indian island to reclaim the wedding dress promised to her by her grandmother. Her remorse for never fully saying goodbye to her dead grandmother surfaces as the entry of a butterfly leads her to reminisce on the remarkable relationship she and her grandmother shared. She recalls the seemingly mundane details such as her grandmother washing rice and their sojourns through the wild forest and the noteworthy events of her ancestor’s immigration to the island and how the Diaspora separate two sisters. The Small Green Banded Sweet Oil butterfly is an emblem of hope and unity as it surfaces from Guyana, the home of one of the separated sisters. Of all the grandmother’s tales the narrator, explores what she sees to be the most intriguing, because it is her grandmother’s and because she would come to play a part in it. The reader learns of the grandmother’s journey into adolescent through the framing of the Tinderbox fairytale. She meets a soldier with whom she shares a kiss and falls in love. It ends sadly as her parents keep her away and both her soldier and her tinderbox are lost down the cavernous passages of the tree. The narrator will become her grandmother’s soldier, reclaiming the tinderbox as a child. Now that she lights the oil lamps in her bedroom with the tinderbox she feels a nostalgia and a longing to communicate with her grandmother. She, Bertha Charlemagne (dubbed with reference to the so called name of Mother Goose) starts to write the stories of these Fairy Tale heroines. An intricate network of stories follows as she remembers the reconfigured tales her grandmother told and now adds her own twists.

The First story *Once*, is a deconstruction of *Beauty and the Beast*. Subtitled, the *Languor of Lady Le Prince*, it follows the Le Prince girls from France to Caribbean home on a sugar plantation, in the wake of slavery. The youngest Belle is the typical beauty. She lives in France with her father and sisters, accepting the mysterious death of a mother and a legacy that is unbeknownst to her. The family acquires a sugar plantation and

relocates to the Big House in the West Indies. Here the girls, though languid in the sun, enjoy opulent soirées. The Big house is a pillar of aristocracy and conventional beauty but it is flanked by wilder spaces of the forest. Serving as a metaphor for the girls, she will eventually feel the evocation of an unknown desire for a field hand. The dichotomy that had been established between these two as the beautiful, passive girl and the carnal bestial man becomes less clear and eventually the reader is forced to question these assumptions as she bites his neck and a trail of blood follows their escape into the wild forest.

The following stories similarly use sensual, vivid descriptions to eschew the clichés of traditional language and ideology as they lead the reader through a labyrinthine narrative of stories that subvert the customary and evoke in the reader's imagination a concept of a new space. Tales such as *Upon the Donkeyskin-Bluebeard Hybrid* explore the possibility of escape not merely to an external locale upon the land but to a transcendence in which the heroine is safe in her own skin after fleeing the advances of a blue bearded landowner, a dead mother, disappointed love and a country under a dictatorship.

A Time explores the destructive potential of a woman who has only come to know herself in a very superficial way. This is a Snow White tale and the protagonist is seen questioning the magic mirror. In an unexpected twist, she is both the ingénue Snow White and the Evil Stepmother. This is the story a faded actress who has locked herself away in her Caribbean retreat with only the company of a shallow mirror. She is lost without the admiration of others and unhappiness destroys her like a poisonous apple. Her Seven husbands were dwarfs of men who could not save her and she waits for a parcel from her princely director. She waits and waits thinking it will be her salvation and when it eventually comes her passivity and disillusionment keep her locked away in her private psychological glass coffin.

In a Faraway investigates the concept of the archetypal girl in the tower. Rapunzel is unsatisfied by the prospects of her life and feels that her suitors cannot really know all that she is. She finds the tower her betrothed places her in to be more of a prison than a pedestal and when no true love comes she cuts her own hair and with the use of the wax candles fashions it into wings. Like Icarus's, they melt but she finds herself in a circus where there is freedom of expression and a trapped tiger. She frees the tiger that has

travelled from a faraway land to meet her but became captured along the way. She eventually rides off on the beast's back into her future.

Place uses the Caribbean as a wild zone as the Briar rose elements are highlighted in one of two *Sleeping Beauty* tales in the collection. The Montgomery's settled on the island and transposed a miniature Europe there, decorating their house and draining the swamp. The birth of their daughter is accompanied to the superstitions of the servants who claimed to have seen the jumbie or spirit of a wild child. The parents happiness overshadow this nonsense and the daughter, Briar grows into the perfect doll. It is only when a mysterious plague attacks the village that she comes to know misery. A hundred years later a university student researches this lost civilisation with the aid of his quadrant and rational science. The opulent house is overgrown and he finds this Briar who has now become akin to the earlier apparition of her doppelganger. He decides to take this native back to Europe but in an eerie twist he discovers the body of the child and his own carnal impulses. The prince is woken from his slumber remains in the wild world of the princess.

There was features a girl climbing through the forest in the hope of discovering the truth of an even that there was on that very night a very long time ago. There are multiple myths, each underscoring the bloody violence of the night. She meets the sole remainder who tells her of his venture through the woods in his red hood and of the viscous bite on his leg but this is not the bite of the wolf in the traditional tale. Instead it is a trap that was laid out by the huntsmen. A female appears in the forest but this beast saves the boy instead of eating him. The huntsmen hear his screams and arrive to find him in the grip of his saviour but they think she is attacking him and destroy her. They had all died over the years and the muted boy who was silenced with fear finally gets to tell the truth.

A Magic expounds on fairytale elements dealing with the representation of women. A little girl travels through the forest on her way to her new home. She is waylaid by a bloody ambush of a band of robbers that leaves her driver dead and her stranded in this wild place. She eventually comes upon a gate, which takes her to the house of the Wicked Witch who like Perseus's Medusa seems to have serpents on her head. Through the kindness of the woman and trysts with her natural world, the girl eventually sees the woman "transform" to a stepmother and eventually a mother who displays another

sensibility from the refined world to which the girl is accustomed but which is no longer framed as monstrous.

Princess is a Cinderella tale features Lucinda who is lured away from her seaside home after the death of her parents. A “Stepmother” seduces her with an expensive shoe and Lucinda finds herself in not in the luxurious parish but a slum in the inner where Stepmother runs a prostitution ring. Lucinda is shunned for her unwillingness to participate in the commerce of the ghetto and while the other girls enjoy lavish escapades she must clean and cook. She muses with her one companion Maddy that a prince may set them free. Eventually there is a great ball but when Lucinda gets a chance she gets on a bus and leaves it all behind for a fresh start but the ending is bittersweet at best as Maddy is wined and dined in the traditional fashion but is ultimately killed in a gruesome attack.

Lived is a second Sleeping Beauty story in the collection. Set initially during a Caribbean Carnival, two brothers grow up. The elder is jealous of the younger’s artistic ability and when they are grown men working in a masquerade camp and building statues the elder will resort to gruesome acts of body snatching as his victim’s become the statues. He is captured and his brother is left heart broken until he sees the governor’s young daughter and becomes infatuated with her beauty. He forms a statue of her, echoing the eerie acts of his older brother and this girl eventually dies. The statue lies asleep for a thousand years paralleling the passivity expected of the young child on which she was modelled. Eventually though this “sleeping beauty”, dormant in the plaster of the statue and placed in the town square to be admired, gains her freedom at Carnival, a setting of explosive liberty.

In *Who* Gretel moves away from her rural village and into the town as a passenger on a bus. This is what is expected of her and seems to be equated to success. She sells herself to the city because “it is the only currency [she had].” Along the way she sees and alternate road with an old man. She disregards this and continues to a town of synthetic snow and plastic Christmas trees. She finds herself in a candy factory and there is the man who she has seen before on the road. His name is Hansel and he is the man on the road and in her haunting dreams as a child. He works the machine in an endless, mindless succession of days. The city has superficial amusements but Gretel finds the saccharine

commercialism though first entrancing, somewhat unfulfilling. On Christmas night Gretel stares at the stars from the factory roof and an owl begs her to ask the question “Who” as an existentialist dilemma at the root of her disillusionment. In a move that echoes this disenchantment with “success” Hansel is “eaten” by one of the factory machines in a disturbing twist to the classic tale.

Happily is a name that highlights the expectations that follow the fairytale marriage. This idea is deconstructed through the intermingling of two tales. One is of a dancer in a music box who spins and spins but finds no fulfilment in her satin covered, bejewelled home. The other is a Cinderella after the prince takes her away. She is part of a Hindu wedding ceremony and forms a bond with the Prince’s mother but the rest of her life is a succession of soirées and a xanadu of luxury and affluence. She feels empty however and realises that the mother-in-law is a doppelganger for her future acceptance of this emptiness. Just as the music box dancer dies because Pandora never opens the box to set her free, so too the protagonist is psychologically destroyed. This culminates in the girl who was once entranced by a glass slipper and a diamond ring, now hanging herself from a crystal chandelier.

Ever is an imaginative and moving *Snow Queen- Jack and the Beanstalk* hybrid. Here Kay and Jacqueline grow up in a seaside village. Kay is chided by his drunken father for exchanging their cow for some peas, which an old woman claimed to be magical. He finds solace in Jacqueline and a childhood of daydreams and hope continues. An ominous fate is lurking however and times change as the children grow up. Their favourite childhood escape, a hotel dubbed The Queen’s Palace is being renovated to accommodate the new arcade of shops. “Progress” forges its way into the town and electricity casts a lurid glow on their lives. They become trapped on a collapsing floor of the hotel and as their childhood is like crumbling their share a magical kiss on a beach surrounded by iridescent jellyfish. Kay moves into a manhood and cannot come to terms with his desire for Jacqui and his feelings of unfulfilment that progress cannot quell. The town is revolutionised by the introduction of refrigerators or “Snow Queens” that promise to freeze time and preserve a moment. This is impossible in his own life and he cannot seem to free himself and become the prince who can save Jacqueline from the tower he now imagines her in. Jacqui is confused by these sudden changes in Kay but eventually

refuses to play the passive fairytale princess and instead she scales Kay's tower flanked by the vine of the magic peas they had planted as children. Kay's icy hands begin to melt as the pair stares into an eternity together.

After is the ending of the collection but the beginning of the narrator's own story as she ventures to recover the wedding dress that she came in search of. The chapter opens with allusions to the fairytale *The Little Match Girl*. Guided by the arms of her dead grandmother and the oil of the lamps, Bertha finishes writing her stories. She lingers in the memories of the times spent with her grandmother and though she cannot return to them she revisits the river that she almost drowned in as a child. Her grandmother had been her saviour and now the circle seems complete as she bathes in the water, baptised by her memories. This leads her to her grandmother's bedroom where she unearths the chest with the wedding dress under her bed. Here she finds a scarlet sari. It floats in the wind and she wraps herself in the bloody and beautiful shroud. She is a final heroine and the keeper of the stories but instead of binding them she holds each over the sweet oil of the lamp and into a flame that transforms them into butterflies that can float like the ashes on the back of a dead grandmother. Bertha feels fulfilled and she turns to the mirror. It seems to be a passageway and like Alice she moves through the looking glass and into an unknowable future mindful that her grandmother said, "Once upon a time in a faraway land there was a magic princess who lived happily ever after."