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Opening extract from

The Wild Swans

Written & Illustrated by

Jackie Morris

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For Janetta Otter-Barry and Judith Escreet,
my editors in words and pictures for 20 years,
with thanks.



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The Wild Swans



Jackie Morris

Frances Lincoln
Children's Books



The day that she stopped speaking was the day she began to understand so much more about the world around her, to appreciate the many textures of silence. She learned to listen. Seven years of silence, in which many words came to mind but not a single one passed her lips. But to begin here is to begin in the centre of the story. At the beginning all she knew was love.



Eliza lived in a castle beside a forest. The castle was filled with light and life, walls hung with colour, crowded with people. The lower floors were warm from the kitchen fires and rich with the scent of baking and roasting, bright with the bustle of busy working. The higher floors danced with the light that flooded in through casement

windows, glazed in colours that made sunlight patterns dance on the rich tapestries that hung on the walls. Everywhere was warm, and the upstairs rooms were scented with roses and lilies. The queen loved flowers, she loved her husband, but above all else she loved her twelve children.

Eleven boys and Eliza. Eleven boys, all handsome and brave. And Eliza, perhaps the bravest of all.

The boys were close, from the oldest to the youngest, and they all loved their beautiful sister, but none more so than Cygfa, the youngest. The boys went to school to learn to be kings. They could read and write, and they learned to joust and to fight and to ride. They learned about the stars and the moon, and about farming and law. And they always found time in all this learning to play with Eliza and to teach her to read, because Eliza loved stories.

For the most part their days were gentle and blessed. They built secret palaces in the garden, bowers of flowers, treasure islands on the lakes; they made rafts from the flotsam and jetsam found around the castle, and sailed them to their pirate islands; they visited the

glorious castle kitchens where they were given pastries and pies for secret tea-parties in palace dens.

Cygfa and Eliza were often to be found together, reading in some quiet corner or climbing trees to watch the birds, for Cygfa loved birds almost as much as he loved his sister. He loved their song, loved to watch them fly, from the dark-winged raven who would dance on the wind to the heavy-winged heron who would slow-flap her flight across marshlands and rivers, to the hush-winged barn owl with her heart face and silent flight, hunting the hedgerows in twilight. Even the tiny goldcrests who seemed to throw their small bright bodies through twisted hedges rather than fly. These bright jewel creatures fascinated him.

On rainy days, Eliza would read while Cygfa drew plans for curious flying machines. He dreamt that one day he would fly, up there with the birds. On sunny days they would run over meadowgrass, flying huge colourful kites that they had made, painted to look like dragons, like birds, loving the wind's song on the kite's string, the playful pulling of the wind's hand. The kites would dance and spin circles in the air until eventually the

lines crossed and cut and the kites fell to earth.

Together, the two would search for birds' nests in spring. The skylark was their favourite, the hardest to find, for she was a cunning songstress. They would lie in the long grass and watch the birds rise on a tower of song, then tumble to earth on the falling notes and land, never at the nest site. That was their secret. On landing, the birds would blend with the dapples and stripes of shadow grass and only the sharpest eye could follow and mark and remember, until the bird rose again in song from the nest. Then, if they were lucky, they would find the scooped twist of grass, the bower where porcelain-thin eggs lay, still warm, each holding a promise of future song. They would look, but never touch.



On her fifth birthday the brothers gave Eliza a beautiful chair, decorated with tiny fragments of sea-smoothed glass. Her father and mother gave her a parcel, heavy, all wrapped in tissue of gold. When she peeled back the glowing paper she found inside a book, bound in leather, tooled with golden patterns. When she opened the covers she found within its pages princes and princesses, witches and wizards, captive and waiting to be released by reading. It was a book so beautiful that she felt at any moment the painted characters would leap out of the pages and come to life. Cygfa gave her a jay's feather that he had found in the wood, blue-patterned, bright.



From the day she received the book, every evening Eliza would take it to her mother's bed, climb in beside her and together they would make the stories come alive. The queen would wrap her arms around her beloved daughter, cocooning her in the scent of roses. Her mother's great hound would lay her head on the

bed, watching, ears twitching as she seemed also to be listening to the stories. Sometimes the child would fall asleep, safe in her mother's love.

As Eliza neared her sixth birthday she read every evening to her mother as she lay in the great bed, curtains drawn to dampen the bright evening summer light. The warmth of the day carried the honeysuckle scent into the room, along with the sweet singing of nightingales in the woodland garden glades.



The day her mother died there was a stillness in the air. No wind. The only sound the harsh strong song of a storm-cock.

Eliza had picked a bunch of wild roses for her mother's room. The stems dug tiny thorns into her soft hands, making them sting, but it would be worth the discomfort to see her mother smile. She gathered up the precious

book and walked towards the tower steps. She loved the way the steps dipped in the middle, stone worn smooth by a thousand thousand footfalls.

As she neared the tower the servants turned their heads away. Eliza began to climb, one step at a time, astonished by the stillness and the heaviness of summer air. At the top of the stairs she was surprised to find her brothers all gathered together. Their bright-coloured clothes were gone. Each wore black. Velvet cloaks hung from their shoulders like dark wings.

Cygfa stepped across to block her path and knelt down.

"Mother cannot see you, Eliza," he said. "Come away to the garden. Read to me tonight."

He took Eliza's hand in his and together they walked to the furthest bower of wildest roses, and there he told her everything. She had been ill for a long time, he said. She had tried so hard to live, he said, for her children, to see them grow up. But the battle for life had grown too hard, too painful. She had let go her hold on life.

That night Eliza cried more than she ever had in her short life. Her brother held her close, and she struggled

to understand. She knew that her mother had gone. She had seen what death was when the cats caught a mouse or the fox got into the hen's house, but really all she could grasp was that her mother had gone far away, somewhere she could not follow, where she might never see her again. She was angry and sad and afraid because her mother had not said goodbye, had left her behind. She was angry and lost, and it hurt in her heart and her head.

She fell asleep, cradled now in her brother's arms, and woke in her own bed to find that the day, like any other day, was filled with sunshine and rose scent. The heavy weight of the book beside her on the bed was a comfort, until she remembered the day before. Inside, friends waited, held between heavy pages. She opened the book and breathed in the rich scent of stories. There, on the first page, written in her mother's fine hand,

"Only remember this: I love you,
and I will always love you."

It was as if nothing had changed. Birds still sang. The sun shone bright in a cloudless sky, the wind played

the softest song, gentle through the summer leaves. But the castle was quiet. No laughter of children. When people spoke it was in hushed whispers. On the first day after her mother's death Eliza moved through time as if nothing had happened, as if in a dream, except she was silent. There was nothing to say.

Evening found her feet taking her as usual to the tower steps that led to her mother's room. For a while she sat on the cold stone stair, then, one step at a time she climbed, up and up and round and round to the tall door of the empty chamber.

The heavy door swung on its hinges in the breeze. Inside, only darkness. As Eliza pushed against it, something bounded across the room towards her, filled with joy at her approach, almost knocking the girl from her feet. It was her mother's great hound who, for a moment, had thought her mistress was back. When she realised her mistake, the hound slunk back to the foot of the bed and slumped back into her misery. She had been there when the queen had died. She had scented death, but she had no way to follow.

Silently, slowly, Eliza walked to the window, pulled

open the heavy drapes, pushed wide the window, let in the light. In all her six years she had never known this room be so dark, had never seen the window closed. She turned to the high bed, moved lightly across the room, pushed back the covers, climbed in and breathed in deep. All that remained was the scent of roses, but she breathed this in as deeply as she could and held tight to that breath, as if by doing so she could hold fast to the memory of her mother. Then she let it go in a long sigh, opened the precious book and began to read her mother's favourite story.

She must have fallen asleep, for she woke to the sound of the blackbird's song. Beside her on the bed she could feel someone, and at first, before she opened her eyes and memory returned, she thought it was her mother. But it was only the hound who had crept up beside her, seeking to comfort and be comforted by the small child.



Eliza stroked the dog's smooth ears. "You miss her too, don't you?" For an answer the hound licked her hand gently.

From that day, Eliza slept in her mother's bedroom and made it her own. The great hound became her shadow, always beside her, there whenever sorrow threatened to overwhelm. Somehow the hound would know, just before the tide of sadness swept across Eliza's heart, almost as if she could scent sorrow – and she would come close to comfort her.

The sun continued to rise, the birds to sing. The palace servants fussed around the children, making them sweet treats and honey cakes. The king was always busy with affairs of state, but whenever he could, he would ride deep into the forest to hunt the wild deer and try to escape from the memory of his loss. He rarely brought back any game. His heart wasn't in killing. But he loved to watch the wild deer move through the green dappled light and he loved the hushed peace of the deepwoods. Over time the edges of the sharp pain of loss wore smooth for all of them.