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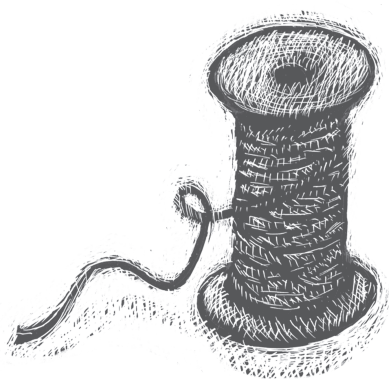
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MR STILTSKIN

Gold

The girl sits spinning in the sunshine in the back room. It's mid-afternoon, the light is soft, and all is well. The potatoes have been peeled, the soup has been on for hours, and her mother has been lying in her grave so long that it feels normal and almost isn't sad any more. Her father is whistling in the flour room.

The wind carries the scent of cut grass in the sunshine, of warm straw.

A prince is on his way here, she thinks, as she often does. A prince from afar, who is coming to fetch me. His horse as white as his teeth. And he will let me sit behind him. We will ride at a gallop, his arms warm, his hair long, as gold and yellow as straw, and he will never let go of me, the man I love.

Men rarely ride along the path by the miller's house. Just her father sometimes, when he has to make a delivery. The mill is a long way from everything else.

But a girl can always dream, and this afternoon her dream feels more real than the summer's day. Everything smells

so much of love and straw that she can almost hear the horse's hooves. She gently puckers her lips for the moment when she will need them. After all, a girl had better be prepared.

The afternoon is so soft that she can easily reach her hands through it to what lies beyond, and before she knows it, she is spinning her thoughts into a golden thread. Her dream always has a part two: The Proposal; and also a part three: Engaged! When she has enough time, she can spin it out even further: The Royal Wedding, The Honeymoon, and then Happily Ever After… The thread becomes longer and longer. It gleams in the sunlight.

Just before The Wedding Night, it is time to put on the potatoes. She winds the thread onto a reel and gets up to light the stove.

'Did you make that? Really?'

The miller looks at his daughter as if seeing her for the first time. Her? That dreamy, dozy daughter of his? Who always forgets everything, who never has anything interesting to say… She suddenly made this?

'You spun it? But how?'

She mumbles something vague. He seldom gets a clear story with a beginning, a middle and an end from her.

He rubs one fat finger over the thread. It's good stuff.

What beautiful work, he could say. Or: This is amazing. Well done! But he's not that kind of father. He prefers to point out what she does wrong and where she needs to improve. He doesn't want her to get too big for her boots.

'You could have cooked the potatoes for longer,' he says, munching two at once.

'Yes, Father,' she nods. And she goes on eating, like a good daughter who doesn't get any fancy ideas in her head.

He puts the reel of thread in his pocket.

He forgets it for a while and doesn't think about it again until he makes his weekly delivery to the royal palace.

A tall senior footman peers at the sacks, with a frown on his face.

Oh yes, thinks the miller. There was a worm in the flour last time. A tiny little worm. One worm in an entire sack – big deal! You wouldn't even taste it, as he knows from experience. But who's going to have to pay, as always? That's right: him.

'One more chance, I said,' the red-jacketed beanpole warns him. 'Or we'll find another mill. You haven't forgotten that, have you?'

Of course he hasn't forgotten. But he hasn't had time to mill any more flour this week, so this week's flour is more or less the same as last week's flour. Which he could have sieved, of course. Which he should have thought to do, of course. But there you go.

The footman takes out a little gold sieve with tiny holes. Those worms won't be any smaller now, not after eating flour for a whole week.

Think of something! the miller urges himself, sweating. Use your brain! Come up with a plan! Trying to look more confident than he feels, he slips his hands into his pockets.

Where his fingers find the reel.

'Oh, by the way, um… Peter…' he begins slowly.

'Pierre,' says the footman, correcting him.

'While we're talking, Pierre… I've, um, got something… um, something that might…'

The tall footman acts as if the miller has not spoken and continues to pick at the rope on the sack.

'Something… um… quite extraordinary, an… um…' The miller can feel his armpits growing sticky under his shirt. 'An outstanding op… opportunity. I've got…'

He might as well not be saying anything. The footman is already holding the sieve over the mass of worms that the sack has most likely become. One-two-three and he'll be in there. And four-five-six the miller will be out of a job.

'Gold!' the miller blurts. 'I've got some gold for you!'

The hand with the sieve pauses.

'Gold?'

'Yes! Yes!' The miller almost nods his head off. 'Real gold. Lots of it!'

'And I'm supposed to believe you?'

'Yes! Here! I can prove it! Look!' Shaking, he pulls out the reel. What is he actually giving him? The other day, it really did seem like gold. But actual gold? It can't possibly be. She can't just spin gold out of nowhere, can she, that daughter of his? No one can do that.

Suspiciously, the footman looks at the thread. Pulls a little from the reel. Gives it a sniff.

'And there's more,' the miller says quickly. 'For you. For your boss. As much as you want!'

'Have you found a goldmine on that barren little piece of land of yours?' The footman sneers his sneeriest sneer, but his hand returns the sieve to his inside pocket.

'It's not *a* mine. But it's mine, um, my… err…'

'What are you babbling about, man?'

'My child. My daughter. She made this.'

'Your daughter?'

‘My wonderful dearest darling daughter.’ The miller sighs. He suddenly loves her so much.

For the twentieth time, the king looks at the little reel in his hand. He narrows his eyes.

Could it be? he thinks. Could it really be gold? It would be such a help if it were.

You can’t keep plucking a kingdom’s feathers forever. And the beautiful peacock that his country once was is now as bald as a frog. Taxes, regulations, fines for almost everything – what else is a ruler to do?

That’s right: borrow, and he has done exactly that – and far more than was wise. His creditors are slowly running out of patience.

And depriving himself of any of the things he cares so much about, his clothes, his dainty appetisers, his side dishes, the furnishing of his palace – in short, his entire lifestyle – that would be going much too far. Wouldn’t it? He has truly earned it all by… By being the ruler that he is. And that ruler happens to have grown accustomed to his wardrobe, his dinners with many courses, and especially what all of it says about him: how well he has done in life.

So, he does not intend to miss out on any opportunities to replenish the treasury, no matter how small and unlikely they might be. For the twenty-first time, he looks at the reel of thread that his footman has brought to him. And nods.

‘The horses, Sire?’

‘The horses, Pierre.’

Straw

It is a very different afternoon. It already seems like autumn. It is drizzling and the clouds are low.

The girl is sitting in the same chair, but the dreaming is not working out so well today. Her father's acting strangely, and she doesn't know why. He keeps coming in all the time, looking at her and then going to sit on the bench outside. When she gets up and walks to the back door, he hurries over to her.

'Where are you going?'

'Nowhere.' Where is there to go?

'You just stay put,' her father says. 'Don't go anywhere.'

'But the chickens need to be fed.'

'The chickens can wait for a while. Stay inside. Do some spinning or something.'

'I've run out of wool,' she says. 'I ran out ages ago.'

'So, what did you use last time, last week, to spin that, um… thread?'

'Oh, just something. A bit of straw.'

'Straw, I see,' her father says with a nod and looks out of the window yet again.

The girl doesn't want to be difficult, but she wasn't expecting it to be like this.

Just for a little while, everything had seemed exactly right. She was a bit surprised when all those men came into the small room, with their cloaks and fur collars, and all the soldiers with their helmets and long lances – but then again, not all that surprised.

After all, she had known this would happen one day.

She had always imagined it would be outside, and that for some reason he would be disguised as a simple man, a shepherd boy or something, but that she would recognise him by his beautiful blue eyes, his noble features and his authority as he spoke to the sheep. And that they would immediately fall in love even before he revealed that he was the king.

Would you accompany me to my palace? he would say, and the look in his eyes would be so sweet – how could she refuse?

But when he came into the room, she could tell at once that this man was the king – by his ermine and his crown. Not so much by the rest of him, though. He was already going a little bald, and his teeth were not quite as white as they should be.

He held out his hand, as she had always imagined he would, but not to take hers or to give her a ring. More as if he wanted something himself.

More gold thread? No, she didn't have any.

'But she can make some more. Just like that!' her father called through from the kitchen. There was no space for him in the room.

'Is that right, girl?' Finally, the king looked straight at her. His eyes were exactly right. The bright blue of a lake. 'Did you make this?'

'Spun it,' she croaked; her voice was not cooperating.

'Good,' said the king. 'Bring her to the palace.' He took a handkerchief from his sleeve and hid his face in it. Overcome by emotion, she hoped. But his face looked more as if he thought the place was rather smelly.

'So, do we have a deal?' her father called from the kitchen.

'Shut it, miller,' snapped the senior footman. 'Seeing is believing.'


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'And then paying, of course,' she heard her father say. She didn't get time to say goodbye.

The king's horse was white, at least. But she had to ride behind one of the soldiers. The other one took her spinning wheel. Her head did try very hard to glue everything together to make it all beautiful and romantic. But she couldn't quite manage it.

The girl looks around the big dark cellar and sighs. What had she been imagining, though? That she would have her own room with a beautiful view? That she would share the king's bed? She really didn't need much, to be honest. A small room at the back of the palace, where she would be allowed to stay until the engagement was announced – she really hadn't been counting on more than that.

But this…

The cellar is damp with a low ceiling and vaults extending into the darkness in every direction, so far that she can't see their furthest reaches. But she can hear them, because when the footman locks the door the grinding sound echoes from pillar to pillar, and on and on and on into the distance.

Trembling, she strokes the spinning wheel. At least that's something from home, and it comforts her a little.

She had been shocked when she realised what was expected of her.

'Spin more g… gold? Now? Here? I can't do that.'

The king held up the small reel of thread in front of her face, looking at her, his eyes as blue as two lakes.

'You made this, didn't you?'

She nodded.

'Well, then you can do it again, can't you?'

She shrugged.

'I was able to do it then, yes. There, that afternoon.'

'What's the difference? It's your own spinning wheel. And straw is straw. Or was it special straw?'

She shook her head.

'Good. Do your best. I'll see you tomorrow morning.'

'But…' She took her eyes from the spinning wheel and the two big bales of straw and looked up at the king, who had already half turned away. 'Why…'

Then she suddenly understood. He was putting her to the test, of course, to see if her love was true. She nodded.

'You can count on me, Sire,' she said firmly. But he had already left.

We're still only in part one, of course: The Meeting. And this is part 1a: The Test. Part two, The Proposal – that won't happen until tomorrow. If I do all of this, if I have shown my worth. Tomorrow morning.

Is it morning already? The cellar seems just as dark, but hours must have passed by now. She tried, she really did. Her fingers are ruined from trying.

But the straw is still straw.

All around her, there are crumpled tufts of straw, sticky balls of straw and a few pieces of straw-like string with blood on. But no smooth, thin and silky-soft thread.

Let alone gold.

When her hands won't stop bleeding, she can't hold in her tears any more either.

How on earth did she do it that afternoon? She can't remember. The sun was shining, she was humming a tune,

and the spinning came naturally. She wasn't paying attention, her hands just did it. Just like that.

'Please, hands! Do it again!'

She shakes her hands until the fingers splash drops of blood, then she wipes her nose, and now there's blood and snot and straw everywhere.

How is she supposed to face the king like this? When she thinks about that, she can't keep her crying quiet any more.

'I can't do it,' she sobs. 'I really can't do it. I can't do anything! Nothing at all!'

The echo bounces her words from pillar to pillar and on into the dark cellar.

Nothing, it says. *You can't do anything, nothing at all.*

Then little footsteps in the distance join in with the echo, as soft as a mouse's pattering. They grow a little louder as they get closer.

Someone is coming.

'Oh oh oh, what's all this? Tears? Tears in the night?'

Out of the darkness steps a little man. His white hair is neatly combed. He is wearing a grey striped suit with a red tie.

'Girls crying? That's not something I like to see.'

I'm not crying, she wants to say, but of course she is. She gives her face a rub, which only makes it dirtier and wetter.

The little man comes and stands right beside her, his head no higher than her shoulder, his beady eyes looking her up and down.

'Ooh, you look a mess. Blow your nose, powder your face, straighten your dress. What have you got to be sniffling about?'

He takes a small lace handkerchief from his inside pocket and places it on her knee. She blows into it. It's far too small

to cope with everything that's coming out of her nose. Quickly, she crumples it into a ball. She hopes he doesn't want it back.

'Now, what seems to be the matter? What on earth does a nice girl like you have to cry about?'

With the wet handkerchief, she points at the two big bales.

'It… It's not g… gold,' she hiccups.

'No, I can see that. It's straw. So what?'

'I have to spin it into g… gold…'

'Gold? Gold out of straw?' The little man giggles. 'What a peculiar idea!'

'But I made a promise!'

'Who to? The king? To George?'

She nods. 'He wants me to do it.'

'Ah, that George,' says the little man. 'He always wants something. He wants so many things.'

'But I can't do it!' the girl cries again. 'I could do it before, but I can't do it now-ow-ow!'

George… she thinks, somewhere in a small corner inside her head. So, he's called George. What a nice name.

'Right, so you can't do it. Then why don't you just go and do something else?'

The little man walks around her, touching everything. The straw, the spinning wheel, her knee, for a moment. Then he reaches into his other inside pocket and takes out a small white card.

'May I introduce myself? Stiltskin is the name. Reginald Philibert Stiltskin. Businessman, entrepreneur, benefactor… Artist, in fact. And tonight: Saviour of Girls in Need. So, dry your tears, girl. I'm here to help you.'

'Help me?' Her tears turn the card into a blotchy little white rectangle. 'Can you do that?'



'Oh child, it's not that difficult, you know. You simply reach your hands through reality to what lies beyond, let your wheel do its work and ta-da: gold.'

He takes off his jacket and looks around for a hook. There are none.

'Really?' She gives a shaky sigh. If he could do that, then…

He nods and hands her the jacket.

'Like this, over your arm, don't get it dirty. I'm happy to help.'

'Can you really do it?'

'Few things are simpler.'

He gives the idle wheel a quick spin.

'Oh…' the girl says wearily. 'I was afraid that—'

'But not for free, of course. One good turn deserves another. Everything has a price.'

The relief she felt for a moment instantly evaporates.

'W… What do you want? I don't have anything.'

'Oh, I'm sure you do.' Those beady little eyes look her up and down and up again. 'Everyone has something.'

Oh no, the girl thinks. There is no way I'm going to kiss him. I won't do that. But he's already pointing his finger.

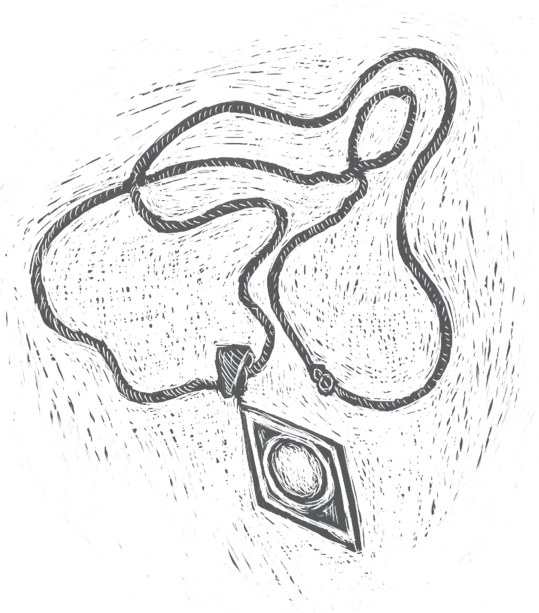
'That,' he says.

She places her hand on the spot he is pointing to, between her throat and her heart.

'No, not that. I can't. It belonged to my mother. I promised I would never take it off.'

'How very loyal of you,' says the little man, nodding approvingly. 'But fine. Then it stops here. I'll just wish you all the best for the future. My jacket, please. Did I give you my card? Ah, yes. Good night, then.'

His voice echoes between the pillars as his footsteps click away. *Good night-ight-ight…*



'Wait!' she calls. She reaches behind her neck and starts to unfasten the clasp.

He suddenly reappears beside her and climbs onto the stool. She feels his fingernails graze against her skin, and the necklace slips off.

Bye, Mum, she thinks.

Ring

The key grinds in the lock of the cellar door, and the morning light falls in through the crack. The girl quickly tidies herself up. Beside the spinning wheel are two piles of softly gleaming golden thread. She was so overwhelmed with relief that she barely looked to see how the little man did it. And whatever he did, he did it very quickly, before disappearing with her tiny inheritance in his inside pocket.

She has a vague ache in her stomach because she didn't spin the gold herself, of course, and wasn't that what the king wanted? He must never find out, she thinks. He. George. Oh, George…

And how happy George looks as he runs his hands through the piles of gold thread.

'She's done it,' he says quietly. 'She's actually gone and done it!'

He looks so fresh and handsome, while she is an absolute mess. But still he walks over to her, places one finger under her chin and tilts her head up.

Here it comes, she thinks. It's time for part two: The Proposal. He looks at her with his deep-blue eyes, and she can no longer feel the pain in her hands.