

CHAPTER 1

Whispers in the Darkness: The Call to Adventure

The Wild Swans (Denmark)

Far away in the land to which the swallows fly when it is winter, dwelt a king who had eleven sons, and one daughter, named Eliza. The eleven brothers were princes, and each went to school with a star on his breast, and a sword by his side. They wrote with diamond pencils on gold slates, and learnt their lessons so quickly and read so easily that every one might know they were princes. Their sister Eliza sat on a little stool of plate-glass, and had a book full of pictures, which had cost as much as half a kingdom. Oh, these children were indeed happy, but it was not to remain so always. Their father, who was king of the country, married a very wicked queen, who did not love the poor children at all.

She transformed the boys into swans, who flew off into the horizon. Next, she sent Eliza to a peasant cottage and, when her father sent for her, the step-mother browned her skin with walnut juice until she was quite unrecognizable.

When her father saw her, he was much shocked, and declared she was not his daughter. No one but the watch-dog and the swallows knew her; and they were only poor animals, and could say nothing. Then poor Eliza wept, and thought of her eleven brothers, who were all away. Sorrowfully, she stole away from the palace, and walked, the whole day, over fields and moors, till she came to the great forest. She knew not in what direction to go; but she was so unhappy, and longed so for her brothers, who had been, like herself, driven out into the world, that she was determined to seek them.

She plunged into the forest, finding it a place of secret beauty and healing. There, a little old woman gave her berries and advice, and Eliza watched the skies. At last, she found her swan-brothers, who, as she discovered, could

wear human form only at night, and could visit their home only 11 days a year. Together, they wove a blanket of rushes so Eliza could travel with them far across the sea, to a land of safety. When they arrived in that new land, she prayed with all her heart that she might dream of a way to save her brothers.

And this thought took such hold upon her mind that she prayed earnestly to God for help, and even in her sleep she continued to pray. Then it appeared to her as if she were flying high in the air, towards the cloudy palace of the "Fata Morgana," and a fairy came out to meet her, radiant and beautiful in appearance, and yet very much like the old woman who had given her berries in the wood, and who had told her of the swans with golden crowns on their heads. "Your brothers can be released," said she, "if you have only courage and perseverance. True, water is softer than your own delicate hands, and yet it polishes stones into shapes; it feels no pain as your fingers would feel, it has no soul, and cannot suffer such agony and torment as you will have to endure. Do you see the stinging nettle which I hold in my hand? Quantities of the same sort grow round the cave in which you sleep, but none will be of any use to you unless they grow upon the graves in a churchyard. These you must gather even while they burn blisters on your hands. Break them to pieces with your hands and feet, and they will become flax, from which you must spin and weave eleven coats with long sleeves; if these are then thrown over the eleven swans, the spell will be broken. But remember, that from the moment you commence your task until it is finished, even should it occupy years of your life, you must not speak. The first word you utter will pierce through the hearts of your brothers like a deadly dagger. Their lives hang upon your tongue. Remember all I have told you." And as she finished speaking, she touched her hand lightly with the nettle, and a pain, as of burning fire, awoke Eliza.

She fell on her knees and silently thanked God, and then gathered the nettles to begin her spinning. The ugly nettles burnt great blisters on her hands and arms, but she bore it all for her brothers' sake.

One day, a king discovered her in her mossy cave. Though she didn't say a word, he was charmed by her and took her to his castle. When Eliza saw how carefully he preserved her single finished nettle coat and her hard-won thread, her heart softened. He asked her to be his queen, and she accepted.

They were happy together and she loved him, though she could not tell her tale. Each night she crept from the king's side to keep weaving her nettle coats of mail. However, the archbishop accused her of witchcraft for her beauty that had captivated the king, for her refusal to speak, for her prowling in graveyards to collect her precious nettles. She persevered in spinning through accusations, through imprisonment, through condemnation to be burned at the stake. All that while, not a single word fled her lips.

Even on the way to death, she would not give up her task. The ten coats of mail lay at her feet, she was working hard at the eleventh, while the mob jeered her

and said, "See the witch, how she mutters! She has no hymn-book in her hand. She sits there with her ugly sorcery. Let us tear it in a thousand pieces."

And then they pressed towards her, and would have destroyed the coats of mail, but at the same moment eleven wild swans flew over her, and alighted on the cart. Then they flapped their large wings, and the crowd drew on one side in alarm.

"It is a sign from heaven that she is innocent," whispered many of them; but they ventured not to say it aloud.

As the executioner seized her by the hand, to lift her out of the cart, she hastily threw the eleven coats of mail over the swans, and they immediately became eleven handsome princes; but the youngest had a swan's wing, instead of an arm; for she had not been able to finish the last sleeve of the coat.

"Now I may speak," she exclaimed. "I am innocent."

Then the people, who saw what happened, bowed to her, as before a saint; but she sank lifeless in her brothers' arms, overcome with suspense, anguish, and pain.

"Yes, she is innocent," said the eldest brother; and then he related all that had taken place; and while he spoke there rose in the air a fragrance as from millions of roses. Every piece of faggot in the pile had taken root, and threw out branches, and appeared a thick hedge, large and high, covered with roses; while above all bloomed a white and shining flower that glittered like a star. This flower the king plucked, and placed in Eliza's bosom, when she awoke from her swoon, with peace and happiness in her heart. And all the church bells rang of themselves, and the birds came in great troops. And a marriage procession returned to the castle, such as no king had ever before seen

[Selections from "The Wild Swans" by Hans Christian Andersen (1838)].¹

Here is the heroine's quest: battling through pain and intolerance, through the thorns of adversity, through death and beyond to rescue loved ones. As A.B. Chinen explains in *Waking the World: Classic Tales of Women and the Heroic Feminine*, "When goddesses embark upon heroic journeys, it is to restore what has been broken or injured. Isis searched for the pieces of Osiris's body to resurrect him; the Shekhina gathers up Jewish souls in exile; and Nu Kwa, a Chinese goddess, went through the world after a holocaust, repairing the cosmos."² In the tradition of these goddesses, Eliza quests for her family. She achieves marriage and queenship, but the story can't end until her brothers regain their humanity.

In the Aarne-Thompson Index, the standard classification guide for folktales, "The Six Swans," with its many variants, is known as AT 451: The Brothers Who Were Turned into Birds. Arabic, Russian, Greek, Armenian, and other nationalities offer stories of remarkable similarity, varying only with which type of birds her numerous brothers become. The Grimms appeared fond of AT 451 tales, since they kept three in their collection: "The Six Swans," "The Seven Ravens," and "The Twelve Brothers." Famed folklorist Jack Zipes theo-

rizes that they valued the tale for its message of family fidelity through adversity and separation.³

Swans represent devotion, thanks to the popular belief that they mate for life. The brothers return whenever their enchantment permits, and their steadfastness echoes Eliza's own faith as she struggles to free them, swordless, speechless, and vulnerable. This is the true heroine's journey: Achieving adulthood through love and intuition, understanding that the craft of weaving and the passivity of silence can be mightier and more stalwart than the hero's sword.

Needs

Most fairytale children grow up with evil stepfamilies or foster-parents bewildered by their adolescent desires. This will soften the wrench of leaving home. In his signature studies, Freud notes that this is a common children's fantasy: After the parents somehow disappoint or dissatisfy the child, he dreams that he is adopted, the child of distant royalty.⁴ As fairytale analyst Maria Tatar adds, "The child-hero stands as a victim of parental malice; he has been neglected, chastised or abandoned by one of his parents. Like every 'persecuted' child, he dreams of running away."⁵ From here come our fairytale champions with magical destinies.

New desires are blossoming, like swans flying just out of reach, so the adolescent ventures into the forest to connect with herself. As Joseph Campbell describes it in his lectures on the hero's journey:

What's running the show is what's coming from way down below. The period when one begins to realize that one isn't running the show is called adolescence, when a whole new system of requirements begins announcing itself from the body. The adolescent hasn't the slightest idea how to handle all this, and cannot but wonder what it is that's pushing him — or even more mysteriously, pushing her.⁶

Adolescents enter the forest because a part of themselves is missing — in Eliza's case, her swan brothers and their magic. On the surface, she longs to reunite her beloved family, but beneath, she seeks to reintegrate.

"I will go and seek my brothers," she says. "I'm leaving the parents who are no longer my protective source. I'm going out to develop into a whole person who can stand independently. But I need to evoke that masculine strength hidden inside me. I'm going to quest until I find it." As swans, her brothers have the freedom of flight, the magic of transformation, and the masculine power of will, all characteristics Eliza seeks by seeking them.

"The Call to Adventure," as it is most often named, implies hearing. In this way, "Inana's Descent" begins with the great goddess opening "her ear to the Great Below," as she desires to make the dreaded journey "from which no traveler returns."⁷ Thus, she abandons her temples, as Eliza departs the palace.

Not all adventures are so profound; one can attempt something new, like sky-diving or running for office. Or one can quest to reclaim one's lost childself, the most innocent and playful part of the personality. One may seek true love, or quest to destroy the evil demons of one's soul. This is a questioning, a setting forth, an opening of one's attention to the forces of the universe and the faint whisper of the unconscious from deep within. Humans can shut their eyes, but the ears always remain open; even in the passive world of sleep they await danger or alerts. To detect the call to adventure, however, the questor must be in a receptive state.

Heroines begin their adventures in a myriad of ways. Some boldly stride into the forest, some make rash promises, some flee their families. Others declare, "I won't marry the man you've picked for me," or "I want to do something different with my life." As Campbell adds, "With the refusal of suitors, or the passing over a boundary, the adventure begins. You get into a field that's unprecedented, novel. You can't have creativity unless you leave behind the bounded, the fixed, all the rules."⁸

Tétiyette was pronounced ready for marriage when her mother noticed how she seemed to glow with a quivering radiance. Her budding prettiness had blossomed into beauty, a beauty as fascinating to the eye as the dew is to dragonflies in the cool of the morning. And to her suitors, she was lovely, more lovely than the rumor of rain conjured up by thirsty foliage during a drought, and more lovely than the pearly intimacy within the convolutions of a shell, and (to be precise) as lovely as the salty glitter of the sea when the sun beats down with impossible heat, hammering it smooth.

More than one suitor moaned, and myself loudest among them, "O light of her beauty, O!" Unfortunately, the beauty herself finally realized this and began putting on airs, sashaying her backbone like a wiggling snake, so stuck up her long eyelashes dripped with disdain: no one was good enough for her."⁹

Fascinated by the Otherness of the forbidden, the call of magic lands far distant, Creole Tétiyette insists on a livelier destiny than her village offers.

While marriage may not seem a very independent goal, one analyst describes it as a far-reaching political decision. "In choosing husbands for themselves, these women are choosing as well, the family and the tribe within which they will live their future lives; in this setting, they will not only rear children, they will exercise their skills in horticulture, weaving, food-gathering, and much else."¹⁰ Some heroines achieve marriage in their quest (as some modern women still do), but others rescue family or slay monsters, showing interest in a wider circle. The recurring theme is a completed family, a goal which heroines risk life and health to achieve.

The man's task is often to conquer and rule, as with Jason, Perseus, and Theseus from Greek mythology. This, of course, reflects the archetypal quest to find a career, win battles, and assume the father's throne. Women have only recently started looking toward career goals rather than simply marriage goals.

Hundreds of years ago, a perfect marriage was the popularized goal because a career was not even in their sphere of reference. Women in our modern culture are no longer confined to the home. However, they have rebelled — perhaps too far. “Feminine wiles,” “simple handicrafts,” and status as “just a housewife” are discarded as weaknesses rather than the mighty energies that once toppled empires.

Many women today, determined to compete in the workplace, “have been content to be men in petticoats and so have lost touch with the feminine principle within themselves.”¹¹ If women have lost touch with the feminine principle, they have lost the power to lead the family and household in their ancient roles of strength. Girls learn that to compete with boys they must never show fear or emotion, never risk being called “hysterical” or “shrewish.” Getting “tied down” will end their careers, and so they must choose strength or femininity, never both.

Inside, this ball of frustration churns: Act against one’s own nature or seem weak. The girl tries to sort through her complex emotions but nothing in this world of discarded rules and absent standards offers guidance. The feminine principle, buried and pressed into the darkness of her unexplored soul, whispers within her.

All night I could not sleep
because of the moonlight on my bed.
I kept on hearing a voice calling:
Out of Nowhere, Nothing answered “yes.”¹²

The *Zi Ye*, a collection of sixth to third century B.C.E. Chinese folk songs, are traditionally ascribed to a single female poet of that name. This one shows a woman’s frustrated disassociation. Here the moonlight, a feminine goddess symbol, is calling to her, awakening her. This longing from her buried feminine self is crying, and something deep within, this “nothing,” is answering. Here is a summons of the inner feminine.

While the hero journeys for external fame, fortune, and power, the heroine tries to regain her lost creative spirit, this image of moonlight or swansong calling her forth from her empty bedchamber. Once she hears the cries of this lost part of herself needing rescue, her journey truly begins.

Silenced

To redeem her brothers, Eliza must exceed anything she’s done before. She must transform into a creatrix and, upon finding her brothers, “birth” them, recreating them as human. As she shapes each shirt, she builds them human arms, shoulders, chests, remaking them in her own image. This is the

primal energy of creation, something every woman grasps on her path to adulthood.

As she weaves, Eliza is more prosaically learning to make cloth, the creative task of an adult woman. “She must learn to work in a skillful way with a plant that is a strict taskmistress. Loss of concentration, or careless hurry, would be immediately ‘stung’ back into mindfulness.”¹³ Eliza’s fairy asks a hard task, but not a masochistic sacrifice. The nettles’ thorns can be avoided if Eliza stays deliberate and focused.

The harder task is Eliza’s silence, which condemns her to isolation, even while she is surrounded by people. She cannot seek aid or even proclaim her innocence. She is vulnerable to the king, to accusations, to loneliness, to death itself.

Silenced women in myth echo silenced women in today’s world, illiterate and confined to cleaning and childbearing. Throughout history, stories were the exception to the drudgery of life, a way for women to express themselves and their culture. Some wove or built or sculpted. Though illiterate, the women spoke out through their intricate crafts. Those confined to their homes, deprived of voice like Eliza, or Philomela in the following Greek myth, found weaving to be their only means of speech.

King Tereus married the lovely Procne, and then conceived a passion for her sister. While bringing young Philomela to his home for a visit, Tereus dragged her into an old forest where he locked her in an abandoned house and raped her. She screamed, and he was frightened someone would hear, so he sliced off her tongue. As Ovid describes it:

Mutilated, she could not communicate with anyone to tell her injuries and tragic woe. But even in despair and utmost grief, there is an ingenuity which gives inventive genius to protect from harm: and now, the grief-distracted Philomela wove in a warp with purple marks and white, a story of the crime; and when ’twas done she gave it to her one attendant there and begged her by appropriate signs to take it secretly to Procne.¹⁴

Upon receiving the tapestry with its secret message, Procne rescued her sister, and killed her son in vengeance, serving him to her husband at a banquet. As the maddened husband chased them, sword drawn, the compassionate gods changed all three into birds.

Philomela sends the tapestry to her sister — one who will read her hidden message, bound as they are in the secret sisterhood of women. “Ironically, Philomela, the innocent woman who spins, becomes the avenging woman who breaks her enforced silence by simply speaking in another mode — through a craft presumed to be harmlessly domestic.”¹⁵

Vocalizing is a source for power, and is sometimes even a means for casting spells, which Cinderella does in her tale, crying, “Shake, shake, hazel-tree, Gold and silver shower on me!”¹⁶ This power, predominantly employed by the

Grimms' females, is "an imperative addressed to natural powers," emphasizing women's constant connection with nature.¹⁷ The Greek sirens or German Lorelei have beautiful voices which lure sailors to doom. Mermaids are known for song, as are Germanic fish-tailed nixies and the seductive slavic Veelas, whose charm makes men forget food or sleep. Even as Eliza weaves and sews, she is cut off from the greater feminine magic, that of nature and the supernatural, until her voice is restored.

Fairytales show silent, virtuous maids like Cinderella and the little mermaid, who never complain of their vicious treatment, and even more silent, virtuous but dead mothers. Contrasted with this are the vocal witches and stepmothers giving orders. While silence teaches discipline and patience, the heroine must absorb her adversary's voice in order to ascend. She becomes queen, the one who gives orders and decides fates. She becomes the sorceress Circe who enchants men into pigs or Snow White's stepmother with her magic mirror. But the magic awaiting mastery is volatile, primeval. Thus, the heroine must journey through the forest of the self, the underworld and beyond, in order to claim it.

Seeking the Self

Jungian psychology teaches that man has a feminine side and woman a masculine side, anima and animus respectively. For the man, his anima is his intuition, wisdom, empathy, compassion. As he travels into the forest and meets the Great Goddess, she taps into these qualities in him. This is the growth of the unconscious: the needs and longings and understanding which only exist below conscious thought. On his spiritual quest, the Goddess represents his inner anima, his submerged gentler side, as he quests to integrate all of his fragmented parts into a powerful whole.

By contrast, the heroine quests for her source of strength. When the woman meets her lover, he acts as animus and evokes masculine traits within her: logic, rationality, intellect. Her conscious side, aware of the world around her, grows, and she can rule and comprehend the exterior world.

As with *Beauty and the Beast* and other tales of meeting the male power,

"*The Wild Swans*" shows Eliza growing through her relationships with the masculine, as her six brothers and husband support and teach her. At the most superficial level, the animus represents brute force and power, like the unsympathetic kingly father who rejects Eliza. She learns

STAGES OF ANIMUS GROWTH IN THE QUESTING HEROINE

1. Brutishness and Physical Force
2. Initiative and Planning
3. Law, Rule, and Order
4. Wisdom and Spiritual Fulfillment

from this injustice and then encounters men who teach her the next higher animus stage. This is initiative and thought-out action: The swans plan with their sister to take her to safety. The third, more developed, stage is law, rule, and order. Eliza weds these qualities in her kindly royal husband, and incorporates them as she becomes a proper queen. The final stage is wisdom. The animus in its highest stage “gives the woman spiritual firmness, an invisible inner support that compensates for her outer softness.”¹⁸ In the end, Eliza restores her brothers and they gather around her. She returns to life as they do, all through their mutual devotion.

For both the questing hero and heroine, the opposite sex brings forth their untapped powers, evoking the man’s gentleness and woman’s strength. Further, the highly developed animus connects the woman with her spiritual side, making her even more receptive to her own creativity. Thus, the heroine, as well as the hero, obtains the mystical feminine energy that offers endless emotion, sympathy, nature, magic, insight, and perception. For both, this integration leads to maturity and wholeness on the journey to adulthood.