

The King Who Lost his Smile

By Holly M Wright

Once upon a time there was a young girl who had the most beautiful smile in all the land. Her smile could light up the darkest of corners, make little babies squeal with glee, and tame the wildest of beasts. As word spread of the little girl's smile people began to come from far and wide to catch a glimpse of it. They swore it was magic. Now the little girl, who naturally had an enormous heart, was thrilled to share her smile with anyone who wished to see it, for nothing brought the girl more delight than the joy of others. She welcomed these visitors on her walks and began to learn about the far flung reaches of the land. Her parents were so proud.

Now far away on the other side of the land sat the capital where the king lived. He was a well-liked king, always generous, with a warm heart. He was passionately in love with his queen who became his entire world. One day the queen fell ill and though the healers did all they could, it simply wasn't enough, and the king's beloved queen passed away. The king sealed the palace, sinking into a deep depression. Nothing could bring him joy. Food turned to ash in his mouth. The jesters were no longer funny. The palace gardens fell into disarray with no one to tend to them. The king issued a decree—no one was allowed to have any happiness. No one could smile and laughter was punishable by death. A deep gloom settled over the capital.

This decree took a long time to spread through the kingdom because everyone in the capital lost the will to do any work. The king's sadness was infectious. But the news of the decree did indeed slowly spread. People stopped coming to see the little girl with the beautiful smile but all she noticed was that she heard less stories. Being the carefree child she was she didn't really mind, it gave her more time in her little garden with her bluebells. But her parents worried. "I worry our daughter will get lonely," said Mother.

“I worry too,” said father. “She brings others so much joy.” And so, they thought, and thought, and thought, but couldn’t figure out why people would stop coming to visit their daughter. Being on the far edges of the kingdom meant that they were always last to receive any news and the king’s new decree looked like it might never reach their village so how were they to know that joy had been banned from the land.

Mother and father came up with a plan. They would take their daughter to see the king who they had always heard had a very warm heart. Surely, he would know best how to save her smile, after all she was only a child and couldn’t possibly understand.

Her parents found her playing in the garden, singing to her bluebells, and told her the good news. “We are moving to the capital,” said mother.

“The king will love your smile,” said father.

The girl’s smile faltered, but she said, “You are my parents and therefore you know what is best. I will say goodbye to my friends, the bluebells. I am sure I will like the capital just as well as our little cottage.” And she smiled, but it wasn’t quite as bright as usual. However, it being a particularly sunny day, her parents took no notice and went to hitch their plow horse to their best cart, the one they used on market day.

The little girl turned back to her bluebells and hummed a little tune

*Goodbye little ladies,
I’ll see you soon.
Goodbye little ladies,
Remember this tune
I may be gone,
But I’ll be along
To sing you another sweet tune*

She shed a single tear and tried to smile but the bluebells drooped as though they were sad to see her go.

Mother and father took no notice of the droopy flowers or the grey clouds on the horizon and bundled their little girl into the back of their best cart, the one they used on market day. And off they went.

After a long and somewhat boring journey, they arrived in the capital and the little girl's curiosity overcame her. She smiled as they drove through town and the sun began to shine a little brighter. A hush descended over the town. The sun hadn't shown brightly since the queen died. The road to the palace was immediately cleared and the gates opened as if by magic. The little girl laughed with delight and the palace walls began to shine. She thought she heard a gasp as they drove up to the palace but paid it no mind.

Now the people of the capital were frightened by her pure joy for, since the queen had died and the king issued his decree, no one had smiled or laughed. The little girl knew nothing of this, of course, since the news never reached her tiny village. She clapped with glee as their cart stopped in front of the doors to the palace. "Oy my," she thought to herself, "everyone here looks so sad, but if I lived in a place as grand as this, I shouldn't help but smile so hard I might burst." But though she smiled her biggest and brightest, though the palace walls shone brightly with her joy, not a single servant would look at her. Not a single servant smiled.

The little girl was ushered into the throne room which was dark and gloomy. The curtains were tightly shut and the only light came from smoky torches that lined the walls. The girl coughed and peered through the gloom to see a sunken old man lost in a grand throne.

"Who's there?" croaked the king, for indeed he was the sunken old man lost in the giant throne. The little girl said nothing but made her way to the end of the impossibly long throne room. She peered up at the king.

But she didn't see a king. She saw a lonely heart desperately in need of a friend. She climbed up the throne, which was twice as tall as she was, and reached out and tapped the weary old king on the shoulder. He slowly turned to look at who could possibly be intruding on his misery to find a little girl perched on the arm of the throne. "Hi!" said the little girl. And she smiled.

As she smiled the king began to change. His eyes softened and he sat up a little straighter. He adjusted his crown and looked around. He looked back at the little girl who smiled all the brighter. The king cleared his throat and croaked out a, "Hi." His face began to move, to tremble, and the tiniest little smile touched his lips.

The girl beamed. The king leapt off his throne and threw open the curtains. He called all his ministers and all his chamberlains who doused the smoky torches and issued a new decree that spread through the kingdom like wildfire—joy was once again welcome in the kingdom.

The king threw an enormous ball that night in honor of his little friend. At this grand ball he knelt before her and said, "Thank you, my little friend. I had forgotten how to smile. You let me see the beauty of my kingdom again—whatever I have is yours, just name it."

The little girl thought for a moment and looked at all the riches that surrounded her. But when she turned back to the king she said, "Your smile is thanks enough. What I would really like is to go back to my cottage. I promised my bluebells I would be back and they get so droopy without me."

The king laughed a big booming laugh that made the sky sparkle and said, "Your wish is my command, little friend, but know you will always have a friend here should you need it." And the little girl with the beautiful smile returned to her little cottage in the good cart, the one they use on market days. There she lived and grew up, tending to her bluebells.

Rumor has it that, in a distant village, one can still find a little old lady with a smile that can cure heart aches and the most beautiful bluebells in the land that aren't the least bit droopy. The village itself is quite small and her cottage is quite humble and it is quite far away from the capital, but once a year in the middle of the night, a carriage that looks suspiciously like the king's carriage arrives at her door. And on those nights, once a year, booming laughter can be heard rolling through the hills. Sometimes it's so loud and filled with joy that even the sky will sparkle.