

A Wolfish Tale For 2016

Mairi Neil

Councillor Wolf stared at the letter and growled. How dare they ruin his plans for a golf course and luxury hotel? ‘Porcine parasites,’ he muttered, ‘protective species indeed!’

He loped over to the window while crushing the letter in his large hairy hand. Keen eyes stared out at the expansive green acres he coveted. Desirable land now sequestered for social housing by the State Government. He gnashed his teeth before returning to his desk and extracting a Havana cigar from a mahogany and gilt-edged box. A gift from a foreign investor who will be unhappy at this stupid bureaucratic decision.

Councillor Wolf puffed and schemed, his bushy eyebrows knitted first in consternation, then concentration until slamming his fist on the desk. Every hair on his body bristled in celebration.

‘Eureka!’

He rubbed the crumpled letter smooth and read again the names of the lucky family who’d be the trial tenants for the innovative social houses designed by three different firms vying for the building contracts. Houses will be of straw, sticks and mud bricks.

The lucky recipients of taxpayers’ largesse, members of the Pig family. Councillor Wolf wished he could look the relevant government minister in the eye and explain home truths about the way the world worked. These three chosen brothers were losers. Society sick of sob stories of unfair imprisonment, endangered bloodlines, slaughtered parents, bleeding heart blah, blah, blah.

Wolf scowled with contempt every time he read about those converted vegetarians demanding asylum and special treatment because of past government crimes. He brushed his mane of grey away from his face and tried to slow his breathing as his blood pressure rose. Everyone had a story of persecution if you go back far enough into history.

His black eyes focused on a large painting on the opposite wall. Even his ancestors, almost wiped off the face of the earth, despite their physical prowess. Completely wiped out in England by the early 1500s, Scotland followed in the mid 1700s and most of Europe joined the slaughter not long after. It was a miracle survivors in Russia, China and the Americas bred.

He stabbed at the computer keyboard. They make Wolf families of stern stuff. Not just survivors, but adaptors - born leaders - not squealers and layabouts like the Pigs.

After pressing send, the councillor relaxed back in his chair, stretched his long limbs and waited for his mate in planning to send the exact locations of the three prototype houses. He tapped ash into an ornate ashtray. How easily moles are bought! He must

work out effective ways of scaring those little piggies off. With their houses abandoned or destroyed, they will prove the relocation scheme a failure.

Wolf huffed and puffed, taking long drags on his cigar, producing a cloud of swirling blue smoke. He grinned, baring large teeth that gleamed white and threatening. Roast pork, he thought, yum, yum.

He glanced at the painting, felt a surge of affinity with the wild silver-grey wolf atop the mountain, howling beneath a full moon and claiming ownership of all the land below and swivelled in his leather chair.

His eyes devoured the green acres outside as his stomach juices synchronised with primeval thoughts. Cigar smoke drifted towards an open window.

‘Huff and puff,’ whispered the councillor, imagining the three houses vanishing like the smoke, and three porcine parasites disappearing too. He grinned. Development didn’t have to be progressive or fair; they should write survival of the fittest into law.



After The Ball Is Over

Mairi Neil

‘Cinderella, dear—you left your earrings in the bathroom again!’

Cinderella winced, clamped her teeth together and felt the now familiar twinge of pain. Her right jaw ached from grinding her teeth - a nightly habit developed not long after her marriage to Prince Charming, twelve months ago.

‘Cinderella... did you hear me?’ Prince Charming’s voice rose an octave, irritating Cinderella even more. Looking into her dressing-table mirror, she poked her tongue out in the bathroom's direction.

She stared at her reflection in the large gilt mirror, scanned the pale pink walls of her bedchamber, and sighed. Blonde hair hung soft and loose, framing a youthful face devoid of make-up. Cinderella loved the natural look, but Prince Charming preferred his regal partner to dress each day like a princess, forever harking back to the night of the extravagant ball when they first met. A night Cinderella regretted. She murmured to the mirror, ‘You understand my shattered dream, hear my confessions, see my pretence—you’re really my guilt mirror!’

The scent of rosemary and honeysuckle wafted through the open window with the summer breeze. Frilly lace curtains framing the lattice windows fluttered, disturbing a pair of lovebirds nestling in the honeysuckle vine clinging to the castle wall. Startled, the birds flew off, their delicate wings floating into the cornflower sky, like a rippling satin ribbon. ‘Oh, to be so free... to fly off!’ Cinderella confided to the mirror.

Prince Charming appeared by his wife’s side, catching her by surprise, ‘What has gone off, dear?’

Cinderella blushed, then stammered, ‘the birds flew off.’

Prince Charming placed a pair of pearl earrings in front of his wife with a disapproving shake of his head. She stared at the jewellery, avoiding eye contact with her husband. Silently, counted to ten.

Unaware of the effect he was having on Cinderella, Prince Charming marched over and pulled the window shut with a bang. ‘Good riddance to the messy little blighters!’

Turning to Cinderella he berated, 'how many times have I asked you to close this window after an hour? You know the dust travels with the breeze. Not to mention flies and birds.'

He walked around the room wiping surfaces with a white-gloved hand, inspecting corners, straightening pictures and ornaments, smoothing the already smooth silk crimson bedspread.

Cinderella's knuckles whitened as she gripped a tub of moisturising cream. She chewed the inside of her bottom lip while her free hand rubbed ferociously at an imaginary spot on the glass surface of the dressing table. Ice-blue eyes followed the Prince's every move. She snapped. 'The maid has cleaned in here this morning, Prince... I was enjoying the fresh air.'

Prince Charming paused and examined his gold brocade jacket and white pantaloons in the mirror, tweaking the material, twisting and preening as if Cinderella was invisible. Self-appraisal satisfactorily concluded, he walked over to a large mahogany wardrobe and grasped the floral porcelain handle. The door swung open, its gold leaf painted border of intricate patterned vines glistening in the sunlight streaming from the window.

Cinderella sucked in air through gritted teeth. Her face and delicate swan-like neck glowed red with barely contained fury. 'Don't!' she yelled and the pot of moisturiser, aptly named vanishing cream, dropped from her hand, crashed onto the polished wooden floor, and rolled under the four-poster bed.

Prince Charming spun around, eyes wide, mouth agape. His left hand frozen to a virginal white ball dress, his right flapping mid air as if grasping for an explanation of his wife's outburst.

'And you can take your hand off that frippery, flouncy, finery because I am not wearing that dress, or any other ridiculous ball gown, today... or ever again!'

Cinderella flicked a stray strand of hair into place. She stood up and turned to face the dumbstruck prince. 'Happy ever after is not for us Prince Charming,' she blurted, 'I want a divorce.'



Ugly Duckling Finds Beauty in New Life

Mairi Neil

‘A new swan... isn’t he beautiful?’ These words from a group of children yesterday, banished months of loneliness, and suicidal thoughts for a Mr. Duckling of Swan Lake. The words prove that the wider community finally accept him after discovering the truth about his identity. ‘I now look forward to a happy life free from taunts of ugly duckling,’ he said, ‘and I am proud to be a swan.’

When Mr Duckling settled on Swan Lake, he complained he was ‘too ugly’ to live, but other swans said, ‘Have you looked at your reflection? Look into the water.’

‘What I saw made my heart beat fast and filled me with happiness,’ said Mr Duckling. ‘During the long-isolated winter, I had changed. I had a slender neck and beautiful white feathers.’

Mr Duckling is enjoying his new family, even considering a change of name by deed poll. ‘I differed from my five brothers and sisters but didn’t realise how different until I saw my reflection in the water,’ he said. ‘I wish the Duck Family could see me now,’ he added, ‘although I have no wish to return to them because they made my life miserable.’

Mr Duckling’s tragic alienation began when born, and his birth mother abandoned her egg in the Duck Family’s nest. Mrs Duck noticed that one of her eggs was larger than the others and when it hatched, the baby duck was unusual but she ignored the critics, who said he was a turkey.

‘I was a dull grey colour instead of yellow,’ said Mr Duckling. ‘Big and clumsy, but I could swim well, and Mrs Duck defended me, saying, “He’s mine and I’m proud of him”.’

Despite the efforts of Mrs Duck, Mr Duckling became a target of daily abuse from residents of the waterside village, including members of his own family. ‘When anyone wanted me,’ he said, ‘they called Ugly Duckling where are you?’

The name ugly stuck. They nipped and pushed and spurned him with, Ugly Duckling go away. This constant teasing and rejection made Mr Duckling depressed. ‘All I wanted was acceptance and friendship,’ he said. ‘But ugly me didn’t fit in. I knew no one would miss me and one night I ran away.’

Homeless and hungry, Mr Duckling struggled to survive. ‘I was clawed by a cat and pecked by a hen,’ he said. ‘And the old woman who owned them wanted to eat me because I couldn’t lay eggs.’

He kept running and sought refuge in a nearby farm, but encountered problems. ‘Young children tried to catch me and I fell into the butter tub. The angry farmer’s wife chased me into the lake with a broom.’

‘I thought I would be safe sheltering in the reeds, but wild ducks hissed and pecked me. When they flew away, there was a barrage of gunshots. Two of the wild ducks fell from the sky and landed beside me. A large brown dog appeared to retrieve the dead ducks. It terrified me. However, I was so ugly even he ignored me.’

Mr Duckling remained hidden for several months, often weak from hunger, with nowhere or no one to turn to for help. No support organisations or counselling available. One day, looking up, he glimpsed a group of wild swans flying overhead with long necks stretched before them and white feathers gleaming in the sun. ‘Their beauty magnified my ugliness,’ said Mr Duckling. ‘I remember thinking, if only I had been born a swan and not such an ugly misfit.’

This was the lowest point of Mr Duckling’s life. He remained among the reeds throughout the winter, sinking deeper into despair. ‘Food was hard to find,’ he said, ‘I was often hungry and once got trapped in the ice. I would have died if a passing farmer hadn’t freed me.’

Spring brought warmth, but not from water fowls that moved into the reeds. They shunned Mr Duckling. One day, desperately unhappy, he flew away to die. ‘It was the first time I had attempted to fly any distance, and it surprised me how big my wings were,’ he explained. ‘In no time at all I reached a large pond I had never seen before.’

He looked down and saw a group of beautiful swans with gracefully arched necks and snowy white plumage. ‘I landed, thinking if they didn’t accept me, I’d beg them to put me out of my misery.’

However, he discovered that he looked like them. ‘I was no longer ugly. What a lifesaver!’ His life transformed, Mr Duckling said, ‘I expect to live happily ever after because all fairy tales have happy endings.’

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