

The Wishing Pool

by

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Special thanks to my daughter for several story ideas.

The Wishing Pool

By Graowf

Once upon a time there was a king who had two quarrelsome daughters. One had dark hair as black as night and she was named Raven. The other had bright hair as yellow as the sun and she was named Jewel. The two girls were as different from one another as their hair, and as different from one another as day is different from night. Raven was the eldest by eighteen months, and though she and Jewel had gotten along as well as rabbits when they were very young, by the time they had come of age, the princesses fought like badgers.

Their incessant squabbling was of great concern to their father, the king, but he was at a loss as to what to do. The queen had died while giving birth to Jewel, and being raised without the presence and loving discipline of a mother had certainly contributed to the sisters' waspy relationship. Since their father was occupied most of every day with affairs of the kingdom and was frequently away for nights at a time, the girls were raised by servants and governesses, which are no good substitute for parents.

Not far from the castle where the king and his daughters dwelt, there was a forlorn and dismal wood. All about the wood, the fields and forests were bright and fertile, but in the wood the earth was barren and dry, and the trees were twisted, gnarled things that scratched at the dark sky with withered, taloned limbs. The sky above the wood was always dark, even when the bright, spring sun lit the kingdom's rich fields with the green and golden splendor of flourishing crops. No one went near the wood, for it was inhabited by a powerful witch and haunted by a will-o'-the-wisp. The spirit, it was said, would lure unsuspecting travelers who chanced into the wood to the witch who caught and killed them and fed upon their flesh.

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Legend told, however, of a bright meadow at the center of the dark wood that surrounded a magical pool of cold, crystal-clear water inhabited by fairies. It was said that anyone who touched the pool would be granted one wish. The witch, however, guarded the pool jealously, as it was the source of her dark powers. Both Raven and Jewel had longed to reach the pool, ever since they first could understand the story, with the hope of bringing their mother back to life. More than once the king's servants had rescued them just at the edge of the wood when one or the other was discovered missing.

One night, before the king was to go on a journey to a nearby kingdom, he had a terrifying dream. In his dream his daughters ventured into the dark wood in search of the lost pool. Upon discovering they were missing, the king himself followed their footprints into the grim wood. Calling and searching for them desperately, he became lost in the twisted darkness. He heard terrible sounds all around him and shadows skittered amongst the claw-like trees. Upon hearing a horrible, high-pitched scream just feet from him in the darkness, he started and tore through the trees. He ran and ran and ran, all the time with the sound of footsteps close on his heels and a screeching voice calling out his daughters' names. He tripped, tumbling to the hard earth, and looked back over his shoulder just as a dark cloaked figure flew through the air, pouncing upon him. He woke up in a feverish sweat and called for his valet.

The next day he summoned his daughters before he left on his journey and told them his dream. "My daughters," said he when his tale was told, "while I am away I trust you will go nowhere near the Dark Wood. For the ease of my spirit over this terrible dream, I must have your promise that you will not go there in my absence." The princesses promised their father and he kissed them each and then left for the neighboring realm.

Immediately after his departure, as his carriage went out of sight around a bend in the road that led away from the castle,

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Raven and Jewel fell into lively conversation about their father's dream and what it might mean.

"Surely," Raven said, "this is a sign! Surely father's dream is the omen we have awaited that now we are to go into the wood and find the Meadow! We will have our mother back!"

"No!" Jewel shouted, "we promised our father. Out of love for him we cannot disobey and break our word."

"Coward! Fool!" Raven retorted. "Our father will be gone for days -- even were we caught there is no one to judge with him away. And when our mother is restored, he will be so thankful to have the queen by his side again, he will reward us and we will have both honor and privilege as well as our mother!"

"No, Raven," Jewel said firmly, "you can do as you please, but as for me, I will obey and keep my promise."

"You are just jealous because you know that Mother will love me best. You don't want her alive! You are afraid of what she'll do to you because you killed her while she birthed you!"

"Raven!" Jewel burst into tears and ran to her room. She buried her face in her bed and sobbed.

Later that day Raven set out on pretense of an afternoon ride. "I shall be gone some time," she told the servants, "and may not be back by dinner as I plan to go to the falls above the castle, so don't wait on me." She set off as if going west to the falls, but as soon as the castle was obscured by trees, she turned south then east and rode to the Dark Wood.

At the edge of the old forest, she felt a chill coming from within and her horse became skittish and refused to go further. She dismounted and tethered him to a fallen tree and then entered the wood on foot. Inside the sun was weakened by the gloom and ordinarily bright things seemed dim. The grim, clammy darkness pressed tangibly against her skin and she shivered involuntarily. After she had gone deep enough to lose

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sight of the bright fields beyond, silence and stillness enveloped her as well, making the chill and the dark and the gloom the more ominous. The only movement was her own. The only sound was the cracking of occasional twigs under her feet on the bare earth. A light mist filled all the empty space between tree and rock. Still she walked on, unsure now if she was still traveling in a straight line or if she had turned to the left or right.

After some time, which Raven thought must have been hours, she saw a golden glow piercing the gray veil of mist ahead. "Surely," she thought, "that must be the Meadow!" and she quickened her pace. The Meadow was apparently further away than she had first thought, however, and as she trotted on, her pace slackened from thirst and hunger and weariness. "Oh, why didn't I bring food and drink!" she cried, and as she stumbled over a fallen branch she became concerned that she had come too far to get back to her horse before nightfall. The Meadow, as close as she was, seemed still so far away. Concern gave way to fear, and as the darkness deepened with the coming of night, fear to panic. She took three more steps before dread got the better of her, and then reluctantly and feeling absurd, she turned abruptly about. Upon turning around her heart sank in her breast and she collapsed to her knees in terror, for there before her in the distance, in front of her again though she had turned back in the opposite direction, was the light of the Meadow. Suddenly it dawned on her that it wasn't the glow of the Meadow that she had been following at all, but the wisp, which had been leading her on a false trail deep into the wood all this time.

She breathed deep to recover herself somewhat, and then sprang to her feet and ran through the wood, ignoring the wisp's deceptive light, in the direction she thought the fields of the kingdom must be. She ran and ran and ran. Still only the wood loomed before her. At times she glimpsed the wisp, sometimes to the left, sometimes to the right, sometimes in

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front of her. Always when she saw it, she veered away, knowing that it desired only to lead her astray. Before long, unable to run any longer, her legs shaking and a stitch drilling deep in her side, she slowed to a walk, exhausted, hungry, thirsty. The wisp's light popped up to her right off in the distance. She sat down on a log and cried as the darkness of the wood deepened to blackness like the pitch of tar.

By-and-by, the wisp's light died and another light sprang to life a little behind and to her left. This light, unlike the other, flickered and it seemed nearer. Raven studied it. "Surely this isn't the wisp -- this light is nothing like the one I saw before. This looks very much like firelight!" A feeling of hope jumped in her breast, but still she was reluctant to trust it, "What if it is the witch!" she thought. "What if the wisp had actually been herding me here all the time I was running away!" But the greatest desperation clings to the smallest hope, and she thought again, "But what if it is a rescue! Surely as far as I have come and as fast as I have run, I must be near the edge of the wood! This must be my father's servants come to find me!" And so she stood and stumbled toward the light.



Back at the castle, dinner was served and dusk gave way to night as dinner ended. Raven still had not returned and though there was no love lost between the two, Jewel became seriously concerned and worried for her safety. She questioned the servants a first, a second, and a third time about Raven's itinerary, but had the horrible suspicion that Raven had gone to the Dark Wood in search of the Meadow in defiance of their father's wishes and her promise. She asked the stable master to organize a search party and they rode out toward the falls shortly after dinner, their way dimly lit by torches they carried.

Around midnight, the search party returned. "Not hide nor hair of girl nor beast. Not a sign. Not even a print of foot nor hoof near the falls. But it is dark and difficult to see, and were she

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but 20 feet to left or right but unable to speak, still we would not have found her. We will go again at first light." But the next day, the search again was fruitless. Except for the roads where there were many prints mixed and broken in an impossible puzzle, there was no sign that any had passed by the way of the falls in many days.

The stable boy who generally tended Jewel's favorite mare was about Jewel's age and had lived at the castle since a baby with his father and mother who were employed in the service of the king. He and Jewel had known one another since childhood and had become quite close friends, for children know only that children are children and nothing of the politics of the classes. Jewel had from time to time surprised herself by confiding in the boy, who usually improved her outlook on things, often with a story. On the day following Raven's disappearance, after hearing the report from the stable master of the search party's fruitless efforts, in her despair, she told the stable boy of her suspicions regarding Raven's whereabouts.

"Be at ease, Princess," he said, "I will bring Raven home."

Jewel looked up at him surprised, but hopeful. "But how?"

"I will tell you a story," he said, grinning slyly. "Once there were two girls in a village. The younger girl was carefree and careless. The older was somber and selfish. Both were fools. One day, though their parents forbade it, they were out in the forest that stood in the east and they chanced upon a crystal pool. The younger girl went quickly to the edge and peered in. She saw many small, brightly-colored fish milling just below the surface, sparkling in the sun. She dragged her finger across the surface of the water, startling the little fish. This made her laugh and laugh and she did it again and again until she got bored. Meanwhile her sister wandered off into the forest to make water. As the older sister was returning across the meadow, the younger girl, still lazily dragging her finger

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through the cool surface of the pool, said, 'I wish I were one of these little fish so I could --' but she never finished the sentence. There was a flash and a crackle and the sister was changed into a fish and plopped into the pool. The older sister was horrified and ran from the place in terror.

"Back in the village, the older girl found an old wise woman who told her that she and her sister must have found a wishing pool. She told the sister that the pool has the power to grant each person one wish, but not a wish for wicked ends. If she wanted her sister back she must waste no time but go quickly back to the pool and wish her back, for the pool would only be visible for three days and there was no way to know how long it had been in the forest before they found it.

"As she made her way back to the pool, the older sister had time to think about the wish she would make. On the one hand she could wish her sister back, and that was surely the good and right thing to do. On the other hand, this was probably her one chance to have all the things she ever wanted. If she chose her wish carefully, she could be wealthy and popular and that could be good, too, for all the things she might do for the village. She could, she thought, always make a nice home for her sister in a much larger pool on her estate, or maybe her sister would be happy living with the other fish in the wishing pool. The more she thought about the possibilities, the more attractive they became.

"Thus torn, after making the long trek through the forest, she arrived at the edge of the pool. She put her hand in the cold, clear water. All but one little fish darted away. This remaining fish just turned a little to the side and looked at her with one glistening, unblinking eye. 'Oh,' the older sister moaned, still torn, unable to tip the scales of desire in favor of her sister's life, 'I wish I had the power of the pool, so I could save you, too.'

"There was a flash and over the pool a darkness fell. As fast as

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the flash, the older sister realized what she had done quite by accident: she had wished herself the power to grant wishes. As the realization sank in, she laughed with glee, believing she could have anything she desired. But nothing good can come from evil and the seed of evil had long ago been planted in this one. She wished again in order to test her power, 'I wish my sister back.' There was a flash and crackle right at the surface of the pool, and then a light drifted up from the water and flitted round and round the older sister before it darted off between the trees into the forest. Her power had returned her sister from the pool, true enough, but it had transformed her into a will-o'-the-wisp. At this the older sister realized the price her power carried, for her wishes were tainted by her wicked nature and would surely be granted, but in unexpected and less than pleasant ways.

"The older sister tried to return to the village, but whenever she went beyond a certain distance from the pool, she began to lignify. Now, some say that when her wish was granted, the roots of the forest stretched under the earth into the depths of the pool and held it fast so that it could not vanish. Some say that once its power was bound to the sister, that it could no longer vanish from the world of man. No matter the reason, it is clear that in granting her its power, the pool made itself and she as one. Thus she is bound to it -- she cannot leave it and it cannot be parted from her. She dare not wish to be free of it, for her wishes are always tainted. Thus, she is trapped by her own power."

"That's a horrifying story," Jewel said after a silence. "Why didn't she just wish her sister back in the first place?"

"For some, the gleam of gold weighs more than the life of men. It's only horrifying because it's true." The stable boy paused. "While the village remained, people, desperate, would go to see her and receive a spell. It always came with a price in gold. That's when she became known as 'the witch.' Her spells were always as much a curse as a blessing, but desperate

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people will often resort to desperate means. At first her spells were always just her twisted wishes, but after a time she learned dark magic of her own and so later it became hard to tell if what she granted was wish or spell.

"After many years, in the evil soil of her circumstances, a vile seed of darkest wickedness within her blossomed. She imprisoned the people that wandered into the forest and tried to force them to wish for her freedom from the curse she had brought upon herself. She gives them a choice: they can use their wishes to attempt to free her, and she will grant them what they desire using her power, or she will kill and eat them. Either they refused and she ate them or their wishes failed when they could not muster right motives for wishing her free or destroyed: for her freedom would be wicked and destruction of a human life, no matter how vile the life, is also wicked. A few -- a very clever few -- have escaped by cunning."

"Oh, Raven" moaned Jewel.

After a long silence the stable boy said matter-of-factly, "I can defeat the witch."

Jewel looked at him abruptly, surprised, "You can?" she asked hopefully. "Will you?"

"Yes," replied the stable boy.

Jewel threw her arms around his neck, "If you do I will see to it that you are rewarded with anything in the kingdom your heart desires!"

That afternoon the stable boy set out alone toward the Dark Wood. Jewel watched him until he disappeared over a hill, her heart aching for his safety.

When he came to the Dark Wood he found Raven's horse tied where she had left it. He dismounted and followed her trail into the ancient forest. The earth was hard and barren, almost stone, and tracking was difficult at first, but soon the will-o'-

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the-wisp appeared and he followed its bright gleam. On and on the wisp led him, deeper and deeper into the wood. He carried a torch, but did not light it -- the sun was not yet set and the wisp guided him where he wanted to go anyway. He could tell it led him a crooked road, this way and that, criss-crossing his own path many times. Eventually they arrived at a clearing, wherein was found a small hut, a shed, an outdoor oven, and several cages, one of which was occupied by an unconscious, miserable-looking girl with hair as dark as night, as dark as the wood. Patches of tough brittle grass and a few creepers grew in the clearing. A short distance in front of the hut lay the wishing pool, the roots of the Dark Wood twisted and curled beneath the earth around it. Here and there they broke the surface like the sinuous spine of a serpent and crashed back down beneath the ground, sometimes lifting or smashing one or a few of the rocks that lined the pool. The pool was bound by the wood just as the witch was bound by the pool.

As the stable boy stepped into the witch's clearing, the trees seemed to press in close behind him. The spaces between them seemed to narrow even as he turned around and looked, and as he watched the trees, creepers from the floor of the clearing stealthily slipped around his ankles, quickly coiling around his legs and binding him in place. A stiff net was thrown over him from behind, and a screeching voice cackled, "Two in a day! Delights and delights! One fair and one brave!" The witch dragged him in the net into the cage nearest Raven's and locked the door. The stable boy struggled from the net and stood, defiant, "Witch!" he shouted. "I have a wish!"

The witch turned, "Oh, the Brave One has a *wish* has he? No *spell* he seeks from the Wretched One, but a wish he yearns to speak." She stepped in close to him, curious, and put her hideous face close to his, her fetid breath reeking, as she hissed, eagerly amused, "What is it, boy?"

"Let me go to the pool and I will tell you."

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The witch cackled, "Fool I was, but fool no more! A bargain I will have with thee. Wish for me from the pool so fair and I will grant thine wish to thee. Refuse my equal trade with thee and dinner thou will be for me!" Her little rhyme pleased her and she cackled loudly and danced around and between the occupied cages, singing it over and over,

"Wish for me from the pool so fair and I will grant thine wish to thee. Refuse my equal trade with thee and dinner thou will be for me!"

When she had calmed down a bit, the stable boy continuing his ruse, said firmly, "If you are quite finished I would have an answer to this question, for I perceive some trickery in your devil's bargain: why do you not make your wish yourself?"

"You may demand nothing!" She was angry, but softened, "but answer I will, for I like the cut of your jib!" She cackled, amused with herself again. "I cannot make a wish for me, only for thee. Thus for me to have my wish thou must wish it for me! My bargain is fair -- a wish for a wish."

"I don't trust you. But as I have no choice, I will agree to your terms. What is your wish?"

"Ha!" she cackled. "Wait right there!" and she cackled again.

Sometime during the witch's dancing about, Raven woke to witness the exchange. "Who are you?" she asked, bewildered.

"Shh, you drivel guilt from a mouth full with the meat of fools," was his only reply.

The witch returned with an iron collar on a pole and a pair of shackles. She instructed the stable boy to put the shackles on his wrists. Then she thrust the collar on the pole through the back of the cage and made him fasten it around his neck. She tested the locks and fastened the pole to the back of the cage, then she unlocked the door. Stepping around she instructed him to walk out of the cage as she carefully guided the pole

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through the bars. Clear of the cage she used the pole to roughly push him toward the pool, forcing him to his knees at the edge, his face just inches above the surface of the water.

"Now, know this: you cannot wish for my demise, for the pool grants not the desire of evil. You must wish with heart of gold for me to be set free. Put your hands into the water when you are ready and make the wish for my freedom -- but hurry up about it."

The stable boy put his hands in the pool. "I wish ..." he started, and paused, "I wish ..." he began again, and then stopped

The witch looked intently, curiously down the pole at him, "Well? Get on with it, what's the matter?"

The stable boy turned back to her, pulled his hands from the water, and asked, "Are you really sure you want me to wish this? Are you really sure you want it?"

"Yes! Yes! Now get on with it! We haven't got all day!" and then she paused, "Oh, wait, yes we do!" and cackled again.

"Well, OK." The stable boy turned back to the pool and thrust his hands in again. "I wish," he began, "that this pool would vanish -!"

"What?!" the witch shouted, but that is all she said, for as the pool granted the wish, it vanished never to be seen again and as it vanished the witch froze and stiffened. As the stable boy and Raven watched, the witch's body hardened and grew gnarled and twisted until she became a hideous black tree, hollow on the inside, hard as wood on the outside, dead as stone. From that day forward, wherever the shadow of that old tree fell, nothing would grow. You can find it standing to this day if you know where to look.

As the stable boy stood from kneeling, the sky above the Dark Wood cleared and the full midnight moon gleamed down on the hut, the cages, and the ring of stones around the empty

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patch of earth where the pool once had been. He found the keys and freed Raven and himself. He lit his torch and together they began the long trek out of the wood.

When they returned to the castle, Jewel and all the servants cheered and congratulated him, for Jewel had told them, in the stable boy's absence, of her suspicions and the quest he had embarked upon. They all rejoiced, and when the king returned and heard all that had transpired he was so overjoyed with Raven's safe return that he turned to the stable boy and echoed Jewel's promise.

"What will you have as a reward for the safe return of the princess ...," he said. "Anything that it is in my power to give shall be yours!"

The stable boy answered, "Sire, the reward I desire has already been given, for it is Jewel's promise that made my wish right and true. As I knelt at the pool I wished for it to vanish for the one and only reason that I should return Raven to you so that Jewel might give me her heart. My true wish and my request of you and of Jewel is that I should be so honored as to have her hand in marriage."

The king declared, "So it shall be done!" They were married the very next day and lived long and happy lives together and had many children of their own.

As for Raven, as punishment for her disobedience and for breaking her promise, she was required to tend a garden around the base of the old, dead tree in the Meadow, where nothing would grow, until the end of her father's days. She never married and by the time he died her hands had become withered, bent, and gnarled just like the black tree. When she passed from this life herself, she was buried in the Meadow with the tree for a headstone.

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THE END

