

THE
LANTERN

a true fable

M.K. FOSTER

*to the bird within the fox within the dog within the wolf
within us all*

*Now we lay us down to sleep,
With hands clasped fast so close we keep.*

*Wherever you go before you wake,
I pray for you this tale to take*

*To light your way, this tale just-so:
It's the only lie I need,
It's the only truth I know.*

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(I) The Bird

There was once a great king who was loved for the strength of his heart and the kindness of his hands. But the king was truly lonely and lived with a loneliness like the hollow in the heart of a guitar, the hole in the soul of a donut, or the starless parts of the darkness of the body. Never would it wax, but never would it wane, this loneliness like hunger in the king-great. Rather, the loneliness lived with him, and he with it, in a life that daily felt like starving in a cake shop.

Only the birds knew of this hunger. For day, after day, the king talked to them and told them everything. And day after day, the birds listened. Mostly. (They're birds. And birds are very busy.) But they nodded along all the same because that's the polite thing to do when someone is telling you about the guitar of their heart, the donut of their soul, or the darkness of their body. So it goes, and so it went. But not for always.

For, one day the king said aloud to the birds, "I feel so much, all day, all around, and yet, I feel nothing back. I am truly lonely. I hunger to be free, yet it consumes me. And, however Impossible, I would part with all I had in the world for the End of Loneliness."

Now, the smallest, bluest bird on the windowsill had been listening to the king's plight, and hearing out his plea, she leaned in close as the other birds flew away. They had heard about this story before at book club. (Or part of it.) (As it was only a tale half-told.) Even so, these birds were fairly certain it was just the same as the others they'd read. Tales with heroes, magic, and kings often seem the same. And yet, that does not make them all *mean* the same. (Which this tale does not.) Any more than it makes them true. (Which this tale is.) You see, the smallest, bluest bird was cunning and quick, and she saw her chance the way a traveler who takes shelter from a storm on the road sees his chance when the rain breaks and the sky parts. So, she took it. Chances must always be taken. They might not come again. That's why they're called chances, from the old French *cheance*, from the Latin *cheoir* "to strike, to befall." For with

chance, you either swing the hammer or you become the nail. And this bird was no nail.

“I will help you, great king,” chirped the bird. “I will bring you the End of Loneliness.”

But the king laughed softly and gave the smallest, bluest bird a blueberry. She was his favorite bird and best friend of the birds. She would listen to his bad karaoke. And he would listen to her equal-parts love and rage over her favorite soap operas. (Birds love soap operas.) (They don’t make the rules, they’re birds.) She would encourage him to keep healing his anxiety, so he did. And he would encourage her, ever ablaze with passion and conviction, to never abridge herself for him or anyone, so she didn’t.

The lonely king-great would not have his little friend take on such a quest for him and told her so. But the bird replied it wasn’t for him. And in his heart, he knew she was right.

“It is for all of us that I must go,” said the bird, for she both felt for the king’s loneliness and felt loneliness herself. According to reference books, “the word ‘loneliness’ is an uncountable noun.” (Which feels miscalculated.) As such, loneliness “does not have a plural form.” (But maybe it should.) You see, all our lonelinesses are connected. Even the birds, this bird’s included. And she knew it. “I’ll see it done that we may all see it won.”

The king was confused by this. (He struggled with abstraction.) (Which the bird knew.) And so, she said it another way.

“Give me the blue jewel from your crown, and I will bring you that which is vaster than love and older than the kiss.”

This was even more confusing to the king, who was reluctant to part with the gem. It had been in the crown of his family for three generations, and he could not be parted with such an heirloom. As such, the king offered the smallest bluest bird as much as he could part with, including his stamp collection, his favorite sneakers, and his rarest, most valuable collectible comic book.

“I’ll have none, but the jewel from your crown,” chirped the bird.

So, the king had a choice. There is always a choice. Was he to trust his little friend? Or risk never knowing the End of Loneliness? (Which felt like a biggie.) (You know, since he was starving in a cake shop.) (Not really.) (But it really felt that way.) (So, it was.)

Thus, without another thought, the king gave the blue jewel to the

smallest, bluest bird—who swallowed it immediately. And flew away.

The king lamented then, realizing that he had just parted with the best heirloom of his kingdom. But his lamentation was not his grief. Not at all. Grief is a horse of a different color and an animal of a different jaw. And the king was trampled and gnawed by grief over the loss of his truest friend, for it was she, the smallest, bluest bird. In the guitar of his heart, the donut of his soul, and the starless darkness of his body, he felt he would never see her again. It was then the great king finally knew true loneliness.

(2) The Beasts

Now, the smallest, bluest bird was no *dissembler-thou*. She was not swayed from her quest or its stakes. She flew from the castle and kept sailing through the high blue sky until she spied the forest. Flying into the forest, the bird kept winging her way ahead until she'd reached a part of its wooded body so dark not even the sun (which is a star) would shine. It was there that she spied her mark: a fox.

At this, the smallest, bluest bird flew down and, puffing up, spoke thus to the fox: "You are no fox! For I have seen greater costumed rats and fleas than any fox you could ever be!"

To which the fox replied, "You're not enough of a bird to say such things to me! But I'll have at you and gobble you up, and then you'll know what a real fox is made of!" And with that, the fox gobbled the bird up and went along his way.

But not for long.

The fox could feel the bird rolling and turning herself within his belly. She flapped her true-blue wings and scratched her small sharp claws inside him. By doing so, the bird started to steer the fox wherever she wanted him to go—which was inconvenient for the fox. When you're a fox, everything is inconvenient to you that is not your idea. Most foxes deal with it, instead of being crybabies. This fox was not most foxes. This fox whined and whined until he found himself steered directly in front of the biggest dog he'd ever seen. This gave the fox something to actually cry about. And yet, it stopped his tears altogether. The real somethings to actually cry about never make us actually cry. (But we have to remember to *breathe*.) (Which the fox did.) The fox's mouth trembled and cracked open, through which the bird called from within:

"You are no dog! For I have seen greater costumed cats and rats than any dog you could ever be!"

To which the dog replied, "You are not enough of a fox to say such things to me! But I'll have at you and gobble you up, and then you'll know what

a real dog is made of!”

And with that, the dog gobbled the fox up and went along his way.

But not for long.

The bird inside the fox began to tickle the fox’s ribs, which made the fox giggle and wriggle and roll over and over within the trotting dog. The dog did not giggle or wriggle— but the opposite, in fact. The dog flopped down on the ground and began to moan and groan in the least doglike way ever.

So it was this dog’s un-doglike moaning and groaning that caught the attention of a lazy wolf who was on the prowl for weak critters to devour. Because they are not fast, weak critters are considered “fast food” by most wolf standards. This wolf, however, had no standards. (Which was really surprising because it is important to have personal standards so that you can determine what is acceptable to who you are and worthy of the person you strive to be.) (Which this wolf was not thinking about.) As such, a moaning, groaning dog was like a perfect #3 combo meal to the wolf. (Who didn’t know he was about to eat an actual #3 combo meal.) Just as his jaws were about to snap, there was a voice like a crack of lightning! A jolting command that struck the wolf between the ears!

“You are no wolf!” snapped the smallest, bluest bird within the fox within the dog, “For I have seen greater costumed sheep than any wolf you could ever be!”

To which the wolf replied, “You are not enough of a dog to say such things to me! But I’ll have at you and gobble you up, and then you’ll know what a real wolf is made of!” And with that, the wolf gobbled the dog up and went along his way.

Straight down.

This is what happens when you swallow a dog that swallowed a fox that swallowed a bird that swallowed a jewel in pursuit of the End of Loneliness. But the wolf didn’t know about the latter three. None of us really know what all we’ve really swallowed by mouth, by eye, or by ear. This is why it’s important to know what you consume, how it rules you, and what comes up as a result. (Which was nothing in the case of the lazy, gastronomically indiscriminate wolf, full to the brim as he was.) For this reason, the wolf began to howl mournfully, but not from pain, tickling, or ailment. Rather, this wolf howled because he could eat no more. And since not eating felt like the least wolf-like thing any wolf could do, this wolf began to doubt himself and howled even

louder, a sound only compounded by the moans of the dog and the wails of the fox, who was back to crying.

Such was the sight and sound discovered by a woodcutter who had been wandering through the woods in search of his lost dog.

“Villain!” shouted the woodcutter, seeing the wolf, hearing his dog’s voice within, and brandishing his axe. “You have robbed me of my dog! But I will steal him back by belly or mouth!”

“You are no man!” cried a voice within voice within a voice within the wolf. “For I have seen greater costumed chickens than any man you could ever be.” (Where all these animals buy all these costumes, I couldn’t say.) “Be gone, coward!” continued the bird, “you shall have no such life from me!”

Now, the woodcutter really was a coward. (Which was not what the bird expected.) (But it’s what she had to work with.) (So she did.)

“I am such a one,” bawled the woodcutter, sitting down beside the turduckened wolf and rolling his head in his hands. “Weak as I am, I am unable to even do a good man’s work, which is only: all that he can, whenever that he can. And right now, with an axe in my hand, I cannot even kill this sick wolf!”

“Nor do you have to in order to rise to the occasion of your days,” called the bird in the fox in the dog in the wolf, “not when you could prove such worth another way!”

“Really?” sniffed the woodcutter. “You mean it?”

“Sureeeeeee,” whistled the bird. (The bird was not, in fact, sure.) “Have you got a sea-faring vessel?”

“No,” the woodcutter wiped his tears, “Not unless I sell all that I own but my axe to obtain one.”

Bro, the bird shook her little bird head. “Then I will ask you this,” said she, “if honor were a craft, what would you sell to sail the world?”

At this, the woodcutter sold all that he owned, but his axe, to the next man he met in the forest. This man happened to be a wealthy lord on the run who wanted to disappear into a cowardly man’s quiet life with his one true love so that they might never be found. Life happens so: one man’s forsaken house with the fire still hot is another man’s refuge where the hearth is already ablaze, and fate waits to give him back the home that burned.

It was not far to the sea from the forest, and the woodcutter bought a little craft with ease. Into the little boat piled the woodcutter and the wolf, who had to be carted the way there in a wheelbarrow and who still had alive

within him the dog, the fox, and the bird.

“Now sail!” said the bird through the mouth of the fox through the mouth of the dog through the mouth of the wolf to the woodcutter who did just that.

And sail they did. For days that became weeks, they woke when they woke and slept when they slept. All the while, the woodcutter sailed, ever more anxiously, having aboard a wolf that was somehow never hungry, sounding like the dog he had lost, if his dog had swallowed a bird dressed as a fox. As such, the woodcutter’s only question day in and out was, “Onward?”

To which the bird within always replied, “Ever.”

And they lived...

And kept living— because the story is not over!

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AUTHOR BIO

M.K. Foster is a poet, fiction writer, historian of science, and public storyteller from Alabama. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The American Poetry Review*, *Nimrod*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Best New Poets 2024*, and elsewhere, and she has presented her archival research on Renaissance monstrosity, sharks, and apocalypses at the Newberry Library, the National Museum of Denmark, and elsewhere. In 2024, she was named a MacDowell Fellow in Literature and selected for the Fulbright US Scholar Award in Creative Writing to Queens University Belfast. Foster holds an MFA and a PhD, but holds especially dear her work as a bookseller and storytime lady at Little Professor Books. For monsters and more, please visit marykatherinefoster.com. For free mini fairytales and tiny updates, please follow via mkfoster.substack.com.