

Cuckoo

Gill Fryzer

A girl lives here who was once as young and beautiful as spring, with cheeks pink as apple blossom, and lips of berry-red. Each morning she rose with the new sun and wandered through the orchards, dreaming of a time to come when she would sit under the apple trees with a baby of her very own.

As she wandered, the young girl sang. So sweet was her voice that it carried into the forest where, from his hiding place, the grey lord of summer himself took notice.

'Seed to bud,' he said, and his dark eyes glittered. 'Seed to bud, indeed!' He moved to a higher branch so that he could study the girl as she passed by. 'How youthful, how pretty she is, indeed, indeed.'

The next morning the old lord waited until he heard the young girl singing on the path that led past the edge of the forest. Then he dropped onto the path ahead of her and preened himself a little.

The girl stopped her singing, and stared instead at this strange creature with his smart grey tailcoat, striped waistcoat and long yellow legs. She thought that she had never in her life seen anyone as elegant as him.

'Young girl,' said the lord. 'Tell me who it is for whom you sing so sweetly?'

'I am singing for my love that is yet to come,' replied the girl.

'Indeed, indeed,' said the lord. 'And who is he, this lucky love of yours?'

'I have not found him yet,' replied the girl. 'But when I do, he and I will make a home of our very own here in the orchards, just perfect for us. And in that home we will raise our children and sing all day, so happy we will be.'

The old lord bowed. 'I wish you nothing but joy,' he said.

'And I you,' said the girl, and went on her way. But the lord followed her with his glittering eye, and it so happened that, from then on, he watched the young girl wherever she went.

One morning the sound of sawing and hammering filled the valley. The lord of summer looked from the forest and saw that a young man had begun to build a cottage for the girl, just as perfect as it could be. The lord climbed to a higher branch and watched the girl as she roamed through the orchards, singing of her happiness.

'How ripe, how ready,' he said. 'Indeed, indeed. It is time for summer to come a-calling!'

One sunny morning when the young man set out in search of food, the lord dropped onto the path outside the cottage and knocked on the door.

'Summer has come a-calling,' said the wily lord to the young girl. 'I am come to pay a bride-visit.'

The girl looked at his smart tailcoat, his striped waistcoat and his glittering eye, and thought she had never seen anyone more magnificent.

'My husband is from home, and I alone,' said the girl.

'Indeed, indeed,' said the old lord. He made her a low bow, and with that, he entered in.

When the man returned to the cottage that night the girl greeted him.

'Husband,' she said, 'when summer is at its height, I am to have a child. You must work harder still so that everything is finished, and then I shall sit under the apple trees with a baby of my very own.'

So the husband set to, sawing and hammering and painting faster and faster until at last, under the cottage eaves, there waited a little painted cot, in a little wooden room.

As the days grew longer the girl dawdled in the sunshine, sowing blankets for the cot. As she sewed, she sang of her contentment, and from his hiding place the lord of summer watched her belly swell.

'Bud to blossom,' he said to himself, and puffed his striped waistcoat out a little. 'Bud to blossom, indeed. How radiant and happy she looks. A glorious summer is this.'

One morning there was a commotion upstairs, and when the man rushed indoors he found that a baby lay in the cot in the little room under the eaves.

'See, husband,' the girl said. 'See how handsome your son is. See how he looks just like you.'

The man looked long and hard at the baby. Truth be told he couldn't say that there was much resemblance, but being a quiet man, he said nothing.

'Husband,' his wife said, 'you must work hard to keep us, for the baby is hungry, and so am I!'

With that, she settled down under the apple trees with her baby, and began to sing a lullaby. Above her head, the lord of summer watched the baby suckle.

'Blossom and fruit,' he said to himself. 'Blossom and fruit, indeed, indeed. See how young and strong she is. See my child grow.'

Yet as the warm days passed, the girl sang less and less, for the baby was always hungry, and with each new dawn it demanded more and more from her. Her husband, already working from sunrise to sunset, became thin and tired, and as he grew thin, so the baby grew fat, and still it cried for food. Soon the girl too, was obliged to work from sunrise to sunset just to help her husband feed her son, but still the baby was not satisfied. After a while, the girl stopped singing, and began to cry instead, but by then the lord of summer had turned himself into a hawk and was no longer there to notice.

Morning, noon and night the baby cried with hunger, and the parents toiled away to feed him. Week by week he grew, until he was too big for the little painted cot under the eaves, and too tall for the small bedroom. Soon enough he even outgrew his parent's bed, and sat downstairs by the fire instead, demanding bread and meat. Day by day he became larger and more handsome than either of his parents, but the young couple were too tired

to notice. Hour by hour, they dug in the garden and cooked in the kitchen to feed the youngster, but however much food they brought to the table, the boy demanded more.

One evening the exhausted man lifted up his own empty bowl and looked at the boy. He saw that the plate in front of his son was empty again and so was the dish. So was the cupboard, and so was the larder, and so were the pots on the stove. The vegetable garden was bare, and so was the store. He saw that his son's head pressed against the ceiling. He saw that his son's legs stuck out of the cottage door, and that his elbows poked through the cottage windows. He saw his son's red mouth yawn wide, and was afraid.

The man called the girl to him, and pointed at the child with his head that squashed against the ceiling and his yellow legs that blocked the garden path and his elbows that had broken all the windowpanes into tiny smithereens.

'This is not my son,' he said.

'What can you possibly mean?' the girl cried. 'Look how smart he is, how distinguished. Look at his dark eyes, how lively and curious he is. Only see how strong he has become.'

'That's all as may be,' said the man, 'but he is not my son.'

The boy's greedy eyes glittered as he looked at the man, and then at the girl. Then he looked at the man again and his red mouth yawned even wider.

The boy cried. The girl wept. The man howled.

At last the girl chopped the man up and cooked the pieces into a great meat broth, and the child ate bowl after bowl of her stew until finally he was satisfied, and both he and the girl fell into the deepest of deep sleeps.

The very next morning the girl rose to find that her son had squeezed himself out of the cottage door, and was standing, tall and handsome, on the path that led to the forest. His dark eyes sparkled with excitement as he looked down at her.

'Farewell, mother.' His striped waistcoat puffed out as he spoke. 'I am off to find myself a wife, indeed, indeed.'

And just like that, he was gone.

A girl lives in these parts who was once as young and beautiful as spring herself. She no longer wanders the valley or sings of her love, for the apple's bloom has been sucked from her cheeks, and her lips are pale and drawn. Each night she climbs the stairs to the little bedroom under the eaves and looks across the valley to the leafless trees. Each night she listens for summer's return; for his voice, echoing again from the forest.

But the lord of summer will climb into another maiden's bed, his bandy yellow legs as pale as moonlight – and who will sing out to stop him?

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