

My favourite story when I was young

Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère

Being a sickly child, I read a lot in bed – as if for life, like David Copperfield. Aside from an enormous cookbook with colour illustrations of extraordinarily elaborate dishes and rococo pastries, my favourite book was an old, battered edition of Andersen's *La Reine des Neiges* (*The Snow Queen*) which probably belonged to my mother (it was published in 1945, when she was a little girl). For hours, I mused over the faded pastel illustrations, depicting a soft, magical world of snow flakes and blue ice, with a melancholic Queen who looked like a spectral version of Botticelli's Venus, and dreamy children in hazy landscapes that merged into the sky. What fascinated (and horrified) me was the tiny shard of glass that falls into Kay's eye, and penetrates into his heart, turning it into a cold, unfeeling, dead thing ('Il ne ressentait plus aucun mal, mais le verre était là'). It meant that the childlike pleasure of offering one's face to the sky to be kissed by falling snow held unsuspected dangers. Oddly, I also related it to my experience of the sickening smell of ether; its cold sensation on the skin, the white sheets and cotton swabs, the glass syringe in its shiny metal bowl, the woolly doze, numb pain, hollowness, absence. Kay's death-in-life state was such an intimate projection of my own reality. Of course, there were other images too: the children's special place, high up above the street where the balconies are linked by a bower of flowers; the painted roses in the old woman's hat that remind Gerda of her mission to rescue her friend; the robber's daughter who caresses the deer's neck with her sharp knife and yet helps Gerda in her quest; the message that the Finn woman writes to the Sami woman on a piece of dried cod ...

But Kay was the character that intrigued me the most. After all, he survives (or does he?) but is transformed, perhaps forever, unless Gerda's tears really bring about some reverse transformation at the end. Though the narrator unfavourably contrasts Kay's uneasy humour and unsentimental nature (against Andersen's own sentimentalism) with Gerda's unflinching love, courage and determination, Kay also gains something in his strange travels and brush with death. After all, he is given a unique opportunity to stay for a while in the Queen's ice palace. He also admires the beauty of the frosted flowers on the window-pane, marvels at the elaborate symmetry of star-like snowflakes, and later enjoys the lone pleasure of composing geometrical figures in vast rooms lit by the aurora borealis. If he manages to write the word 'eternity', says the Queen, he will be his own master and get a new pair of skating shoes. Somehow, I sensed a personal message in this marvellous, empty and silent palace which also chills the heart, and in the never-ending jigsaw puzzle (also a familiar activity for a homebound child) wondered:



what if Kay had remained in the ice palace forever? Would he have solved the mysterious charade? There is a strange appeal at the heart of Andersen's fairy tales, and something sick and sinister too, otherworldly and strangely close to the bone. Perhaps because the author knew that fairy tales are stories to think with. Feel with. And to die for, even.

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