

snow white



High above a far off kingdom, carved into the rock of a mountainside, there once stood a mighty castle. It was so high that the people working on the distant plain could look up and see it among the clouds and when they saw it they trembled, for it was the castle of the cruel and powerful Queen of the Mountains.

The Queen of the Mountains had ten thousand soldiers at her command. She sat upon a throne of marble dressed in robes weighed down with glittering jewels, and holding in her hand a magic mirror. This mirror could answer any question the Queen asked it and in it the Queen could see what was happening anywhere in her kingdom. When she looked into the mirror and saw any of her subjects doing things which displeased her she sent soldiers to punish them.

Night and day her soldiers stood guard on the walls of the castle and every day they watched as people from all over the kingdom toiled up the steep pathway carrying heavy loads: iron to shoe the royal horses; weapons to arm the royal soldiers; food to be cooked in the royal kitchens; cloth to clothe the royal servants. The procession wound on and on up the mountainside to the castle. The people were carrying with them all the useful and beautiful things that had been made in the kingdom, for everything they made belonged to the Queen and they were allowed to keep only what was left over or spoiled.

No one could save anything from the Queen of the Mountains for no place was hidden from her magic mirror. Everyday the riches of the kingdom were brought to her and every night she asked the mirror:

'Mirror, mirror in my hand
Who is the happiest in the land?'

Then in a silvery voice the mirror always replied:

'Queen, all bow to your command,
you are the happiest in the land.'

And the Queen would smile.

One day, among the procession climbing the steep path to the castle were a pale little girl called Snow White and seven little men, dwarfs, even smaller than her. Snow White and the dwarfs were carrying between them a heavy chest bound with metal bands. They had travelled all the way from the diamond mines beside the distant sea. There, far underground, often in danger they and many other men, women and children worked long and weary hours. Every year they must send a chestful of diamonds to the Queen of the Mountains or they would be cruelly punished.

When the other people in the procession reached the castle gates the lovely things they had been carrying were taken from them and they were sent away, but Snow White and the seven dwarfs were surrounded by soldiers and brought to the throne room of the Queen herself.

'Open the chest,' ordered the Queen as they bowed low before her.

Two dwarfs lifted the lid. The chest was full of glittering diamonds and on top of them lay a necklace shaped like branches of ice. The Queen held the necklace up to the light.

'Did you make this?' she asked Snow White.

'Yes Majesty,' said the girl.

'It is well made,' said the Queen. 'You are to stay in the castle as a jewellery maker.'

Snow White's pale cheeks turned red and she opened her mouth to cry 'No' but each of the seven dwarfs put a crooked finger to his lips, warning her to be silent.

"Take her to the workshop." ordered the Queen.

The soldiers led Snow White and the seven dwarfs out of the throne room and up a twisting stairway to a small room at the top of the tower. In the room there was a workbench with jewellers tools laid out on it. All around the walls, stored in tall glass jars, gleamed jewels of many colours; amethysts, emeralds, rubies, sapphires, topaz. Little light came through the one small window but the jewels shone so brightly that when Snow White looked at them her eyes were dazzled and her head began to ache.

Snow White and the dwarfs took the diamonds from the chest and put them into empty glass jars. Then, one by one the seven little men kissed Snow White goodbye. There were tears in their eyes for she was their dearest friend. They shouldered the empty chest and went slowly down the twisting staircase.

'You are very lucky,' said one of the soldiers to Snow White. 'You will no longer be poor and lead a hard life toiling underground in the mine. Here servants will wait on you. You will sleep in a soft scented bed and be brought whatever delicious food and drink you want. And, if the Queen is especially pleased with your work she will give you rich rewards.'

'But my friends will still be toiling in the mine,' said Snow White and her heart felt like a stone with sorrow.

In the long days and weeks which followed Snow White grew more and more skilful at making beautiful pieces of jewellery out of the precious stones and metals in the workshop. The jewellery pleased the Queen of the Mountains. One evening she summoned Snow White to the throne room.

'This broach pleases me,' said the Queen. 'You may choose your reward.'

'Oh, Majesty,' answered Snow White, falling on her knees, 'please let me go home.'

The Queen was angry. She turned her mirror towards Snow White and in it the little girl could see the dwarfs and all her other friends digging in the mine and dragging heavy loads along its narrow tunnels.

'You could have anything your heart desires and yet you ask to return to that miserable life.' the Queen exclaimed. 'Go back to your work and think hard before you enter my presence again.'

So, as she deftly twisted the metal and fitted the precious stones, Snow White thought long and hard. She thought of the sufferings she had shared with her friends in the distant mines; of how they and all the people of the land spent their whole lives working to make lovely things for the Queen of the Mountains while they themselves had barely enough to live on. And Snow White knew what she would ask for.



'I will make a jewelled belt so beautiful the Queen will call me before her again,' she thought and at once set to work.

'Well, Snow White,' said the Queen as the girl stood before her throne a second time, 'you have had time to think. Tell me your heart's desires and I will grant it, for what you have made is more beautiful than anything in my treasure chambers.' As she spoke the Queen ran her fingers along the red and purple gems of the jewelled belt.

'Majesty', said Snow White, 'I have thought and what I ask for is this: take only what you need from the people of the Kingdom and let them keep the rest so they will no longer be cold and hungry and miserable.'

The Queen's eyes glittered with rage and her hand tightened on the jewelled belt, but when she spoke her voice was as sweet as honey.

'Snow White, if anyone but you had spoken such treachery, I would have ordered my soldiers to throw them from the walls of the castle onto the rocks below. But you have a rare skill and are young enough to change your thoughts. Come close and look in my mirror.

Snow White looked into the magic mirror and saw herself reflected there, but strangely. She was wearing working clothes and yet in the mirror she was dressed in richly embroidered gown, pearls and rubies were entwined in her long hair and on her head was a golden crown.

'You see, Snow White,' said the Queen, 'you could be a princess. Now go'

Snow White went back to the workshop. She stood gazing out of the tiny window and thinking of how she had looked in the mirror, adorned with jewels and gold. Far below her she could see the daily procession of people carrying up the mountainside all the things they had made and must give to the Queen. Beyond them the green plain stretched out until it reached the distant hills. On the other side of the hills was the sea and Snow White's home. The words of a song which she and her friends used to sing when the long day's work in the mine was over came back to her mind.

Emeralds green but grass is greener
Sapphires pale against the sea
No jet as black as the wild night sky
No ruby red
No ruby red
No ruby red as hearts which cry to be free

'What my friends long for is my heart's desire too,' thought Snow White, 'but the Queen of the Mountains will never set us free.'

Soon the Queen summoned Snow White before her throne a third time.

'No flower in all my gardens is as delicately shaped as these earrings you have made me,' she said. 'What reward do you want?'

'Nothing Majesty,' said Snow White quietly.

'Foolish girl!' cried the Queen. 'I know you are unhappy, yet you only have to ask and you can become a princess. Very well, you will continue to make jewellery for me, but from now on soldiers will stand guard at the foot of the tower where you work and unless you choose to be a princess you will never leave the tower again.'

The months passed by. Still Snow White remained alone in the tower and didn't ask for her reward. Quiet and pale, she sat at her work, thinking and waiting.

When a whole year had passed Snow White looked from her tiny window and saw below, among the people toiling up the pathway to the castle, seven little figures carrying between them a heavy chest. It was her friends the dwarfs at last.

Snow White waited for the dwarfs to bring the chest of diamonds to the workshop but when the chest was brought in it was carried by some of the Queen's soldiers.

'The Queen has given orders that you are not to see your friends from the mine,' said one of the soldiers 'She is watching them in her mirror all the time they are here.'

'Please go back to the foot of the stairs and leave me alone,' said Snow White in a sad voice. 'I will fill the glass jars with diamonds and put the empty chest outside the door.'

The soldiers did as she asked, for they liked Snow White and secretly admired her for daring to displease the Queen.

An hour later they returned and took the chest away, down the twisting stairway and into the courtyard where the dwarfs were waiting. The little men swung it onto their shoulders and carried it out of the castle gates and down the mountains.

All that day the Queen of the Mountains sat on her throne and watched in her mirror as the dwarves went farther and farther away. By the time that evening came they had crossed the distant hills. The Queen smiled to herself and asked the mirror her usual question:

'Mirror, mirror in my hand
Who is the happiest in the land?'

In its silvery voice, the mirror replied:

'Though all bow to your command,
Snow White is happiest in the land.'

'Snow White!' hissed the Queen. 'Show me Snow White.'

Then, in the mirror, she saw the seven dwarfs lifting the lid off the chest and out of the chest climbed Snow White, her face full of joy.



The Queen's rage was terrible. She ordered that the soldiers who had let Snow White escape were to be thrown from the castle walls. Throughout the night she sat on her throne speaking to no one. Then, as the sun rose, she gave orders to her soldiers.

'Go to the diamond mines,' she commanded. 'Seal up the entrance while Snow White and her companions are working so that they will all die underground.'

Many of the soldiers were filled with horror but they dared not disobey. The Queen watched in her mirror as they sealed up the way out of the mine and when it was done, she laughed.

Word of the terrible thing done at the Queen's command spread quickly through the land. Many people came to where the Queen's soldiers stood guard beside the sealed up entrance to the mine. As the day wore on, more and more people arrived. By evening, a great crowd had gathered. They lit fires to keep themselves warm through the night and talked in low voices about all the people trapped underground and about the cruelty of the Queen of the Mountains. They knew that by now there must be very little air left to breathe down the mine. Soon Snow White and her friends would be dead as the Queen of the Mountains had commanded.

Suddenly, among some rocks on the outskirts of the crowd, a tapping sound could be heard. As the people looked at each other in bewilderment, one of the rocks began to move and then was pushed aside from behind to reveal a narrow shaft going deep into the earth. Climbing from this passage was one of the dwarfs.

'Just in time' wheezed the dwarf, 'I do not think we could have gone on digging much longer. My oldest brother remembered that when he was very young there was another way out of the mine. He led us to the place and we dug in the dark until the way was opened up.'

One by one, helping each other, the workers from the diamond mine climbed out into the fresh air. Some were faint, some were bruised and many had torn clothes and bleeding hands, but every child, woman and man was safe. Among them was Snow White.

The great crowd of people round the fires and the soldiers stared in amazement. Then the people began to cheer. Some of the soldiers joined in the cheering but others drew their weapons. One of these called out to Snow White.

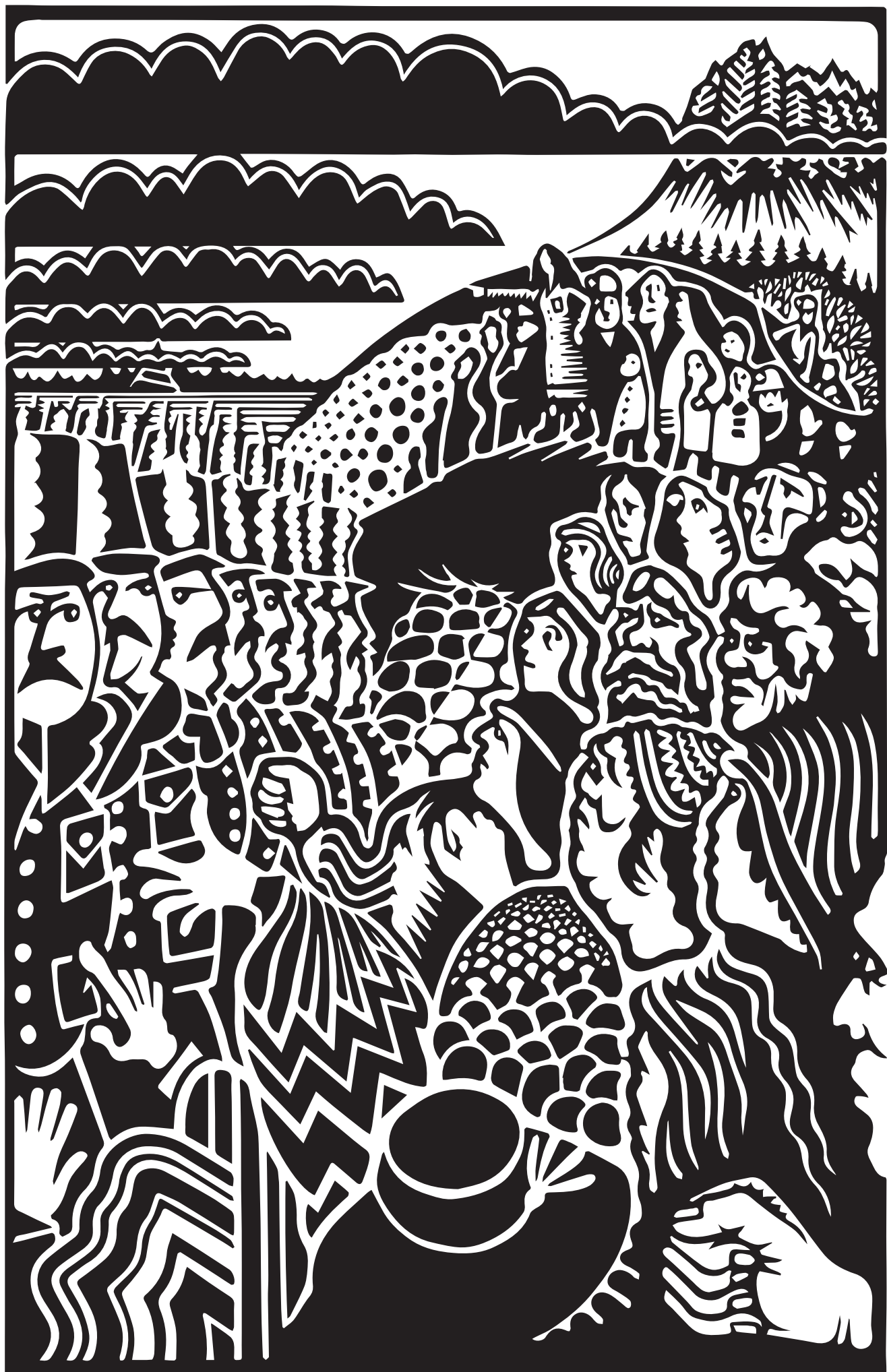
'Snow White,' he ordered, 'you must come with us at once back to the castle.'

'No,' answered Snow White, 'I will not go back to the castle and we will send no more diamonds to the Queen. Everyone will keep the things they make and send nothing to the Queen of the Mountains.'

As she spoke to cheers grew louder and louder.

'Then we will kill you' said the soldier.

'You may kill some of us,' said Snow White, 'but in the end you will lose for there are far more people than there are soldiers.'



The people realised that this was true and they surrounded the soldiers determined to take their weapons from them, whatever the cost.

Far away on her marble throne, the Queen of the Mountains took the jewellery Snow White had made and broke it into pieces. In her magic mirror she could see all that was happening. She knew that the people of the land were rising up against her.

'Mirror, mirror in my hand
Make them bow to my command.'

She ordered her mirror. But the mirror answered:

'Queen who was so rich and grand
The people cast you from their land.'

The magic mirror misted over and when the mist had gone, the Queen could see nothing reflected there but her own face.

Still grasping the mirror in her hand, the Queen of the Mountains rose from her throne and climbed the stone steps to the highest battlements of the castle. From there she could look out and see her with her own eyes the crowds of people gathering on the distant plain. In fear and fury she lifted the mirror above her head and flung it from the castle wall.

The mirror would not leave her hand. She fell with it and hurdled screaming down and down until she was shattered into fragments on the rocks below.

Authors' Notes

This story is one of a number which were going to be published originally as a book called Once and Future Tales for which we wrote this introduction.

This is a book of traditional fairy tales rewritten by four women in Merseyside Women's Liberation Movement.

We have been told by some people that we have no right to alter traditional fairy tales - they are part of our heritage. It is true that we are attacking a heritage; the heritage of a competitive and acquisitive society where the majority of people are inevitably under the control of a rich and powerful minority.

We have also been told that such work is trivial; we should be involved in direct political action. Fairy tales ARE political. They help to form children's values and teach them to accept our society and their roles in it. Central to this society is the assumption that domination and submission are the natural basis of all our relationships. This is clearly seen in the models provided by fairy tale heroes and heroines. Boys are required to go out and seek their fortune. The most daring and resourceful of them win power, riches and property - possession of the princess and half the Kingdom. Girls are required to be pretty, dutiful and compliant. The lucky ones will be rewarded with a life of decorative idleness as the wife of a prince. Traditional fairy tales encourage children to admire these values; acquisitive aggression in men and the dutiful nurturing of this aggression by women.

This book of stories has been written in the belief that our society can never be fundamentally changed while children's imaginations are imprisoned by its myths.

LIVERPOOL 1972

This story was collectively written in 1972 by Audrey Ackroyd, Marge Ben-Tovim, Catherine Meredith and Anne Neville, and illustrated by Trevor Skempton.

Specially reissued for 2019 and in collaboration with the authors, Once and Future Tales has been reprinted by FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology, Liverpool) as part of our artistic programme that explores issues of gender, identity and representation.

Join us in celebrating the feminist retellings of *Snow White*, *Rapunzel* and *Red Riding Hood* and pick up your own limited edition from FACT for £2 each or a set of three tales for £5.

Enjoy a series of fairy tale inspired events throughout April, May and June 2019 including two special events where we'll be reading the Once and Future Tales aloud and hearing from the women who rewrote the stories in 1972.

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