

A Short Story for Easter

by Ben Palpant

Once upon a time, not so very long ago actually, the snow was falling...and the towering pines bent under the load, brooding in the dark. She was tucked in, covers pulled up to her chin and a heat pack at her feet. The bed creaked and settled under the weight of her father when he sat on the edge, but she did not mind. She waited and watched him gaze out through the window, his mind wandering along trackless drifts as he was wont to do.

The snow was falling...

"A king's heart was broken, once upon a time," he said. "So the king decided to kill one woman each night and exact revenge on womankind."

"That's terrible," the little girl said.

"Yes, it is," said her father.

"Could you tell a different story?"

"Alright," he said, "let's try this one. There once was a man who sailed across the sea, but a vicious storm dashed his ship apart. When he awoke, he was stranded on an island filled with terrible beasts and he had no way to get home."

"That story, too, is terrible," she said.

"Alright," said her father, "There was once a Hobbit..."

"What's a Hobbit?" asked the little girl.

"Well, a Hobbit is a small creature with very hairy feet who prefers safety to adventure and would happily spend his days smoking a pipe and eating with friends. But our poor hobbit had in his possession a magic ring whose powers would destroy the world, so he chose to travel a very long distance into the land of death and darkness to destroy the ring. There he met an enormous spider who stung him, wrapped him in webbing, and planned to eat him."

"O, father," cried the girl, "no more, please."

"No stories tonight?" asked the father.

"Well, maybe a different story."

"Okay. There once was a boy who met a witch in a snowy wood just like the one outside your window. Now the boy loved himself very much and when the witch offered him her admiration and a piece of candy, he betrayed his own sisters and brother."

The father paused. His daughter had pulled the covers over her head.

"A different story?" he asked.

The bed covers nodded.

“There once was a monster that ravaged the land, killing man and beast, because he hated the sound of singing. And he killed so many that the people grew quiet, huddled together under their small roofs and listened to the drip, drip, drip of water and waited for the sound of the monster's claws on the wooden door.”

The father paused because the bed covers were shaking violently.

“You're striking out tonight, Dad.”

“What about this one,” he pleaded. “There was once a boy, the favorite son of his father's old age, whose brothers were jealous of their good brother so they lured him into the desert where they threw him in a ravine and gave him no water. When some slave traders rode by, nodding, half asleep on their camels, the brothers sold their little brother and went home with gold coins jingling in their pockets. Their father asked, of course, where his favorite son was and the brothers pretended to look very sad, telling him that their brother was killed by wild animals and buried in the desert.”

“Dad, that's no good either.”

“Okay, one more try,” said the father and he stared out the window again.

...The snow was still falling when he began. “God, who made the woods and snow and you, walked amongst his creation one day and saw that the people hated one another and they hated him. They played king of the mountain every day and kicked anyone in the teeth who might out climb them. They fawned over themselves and played games of power.”

“What did they call the games, Dad?” asked the girl.

“O, these games went by many names: They called the games “Rome”, and sometimes “Greece”, sometimes they just called it “Savvy” or “Shrewd”. But they always called their games “Perfection”, giving the prize to the perfect one, the strong man, who made it to the top of the mountain and left a trail of bleeding mouths behind him. So God sent his son, his favorite and only son, down to become a man. He walked with all those people. He ate with them and healed their broken mouths, but he refused to play their games. So what do you think happened?”

The little girl was peaking above the blankets again with wide eyes. “Did they become friends?” she asked.

“Nope. They took him to the top of their mountain one day, kicked his face and then they killed him right on the spot. And for good measure they stabbed him in the side until water and blood flowed out”

“Common, Dad! These are awful!”

“But...”

“No buts, Dad.”

“But...”

“You're not listening, Dad!”

"No, my dear, *you're* not listening. You've forgotten the most important word in every good story."

The girl was sitting up now and her father's firm voice stopped her miniature tirade.

"One word?" she asked.

"The most important word in every good story."

The little girl tried to plead her case, "You've never told me that word before," she said.

"I've told you that word every time I tell a story, but tonight you haven't let me say it yet."

"What's the word?"

The father leaned in toward his little girl and whispered in her ear the magic word, "...but."

"Really?" she asked. "But it's such a small word."

"Yes, but you've forgotten that it's the little words, like little people, that make all the difference in the world."

His little girl was puzzled. "I don't quite understand."

"Here," he said. Then he took her hands in his own and said, "Do you remember the king with the broken heart?"

She nodded.

"He decided to kill one woman each night and exact revenge on womankind...but...he met a woman named Scheherazade who told him many stories and saved both her life and his. And the shipwrecked man on the island? He was stranded on an island filled with terrible beasts and he had no way to get home...but...he was delivered by God and given a friend named Friday and was saved."

"Today's Friday too!" cried out the girl.

"Yes, it is."

"Dad? What about the hobbit? He was stung by an enormous spider who planned to eat him."

"Yes...*but*...he was saved from the spider and threw the magic ring into a pit of fire, thereby saving all the earth from destruction"

"And the boy who betrayed his sisters and brother?" asked the girl.

"He was saved by a lion who killed the witch and when the boy asked forgiveness, it was given to him gladly and he was never the same again. Remember the monster and the people huddled together under their small roofs? They waited for the monster's claws, but a hero came and killed the monster and saved them so they might sing again."

"What about the boy who was sold into slavery?"

"Well," said the father, "he became a great ruler and one day his brothers came before him because they were in need. They did not recognize their brother, but he recognized them and when he revealed himself to them, they were ashamed and afraid for their lives...*but*...he forgave them and lavished their lives with good things and with hope."

"Those are very good stories," said his daughter who was quite relieved.

“Yes, but I have not finished.”

“O, yes,” cried the girl. “What about God's only son?”

“Ah, yes. God sent his son and he walked amongst us while we played ugly games and kicked each other in the teeth, and when he was killed for not playing our games, he died and the blood and water flowed down his side and along his legs and onto the ground, and they buried him in the dark, cold ground.”

He paused and looked outside again. The snow was falling.

His daughter was now impatient and she sat up. “...But!...”

A grin broke across his face and he said, “...But three days later, he came to life and broke the ground, took the monster by the throat and chained him down. Remember the blood and water that flowed out of his body and down his legs and onto the ground? It still flows across the whole world. His blood and water will, like a mighty river, wash away all the ugly games and all the strong men will be drowned. That's why you've been baptized by water and why we have communion every week, my little darling.”

He paused while the snow fell softly outside the window.

“Don't ever forget, my love, that God will save us from the wicked kings and the monsters that hate singing. And every day the world will be cleaner and brighter, filled to overflowing with little people...just...like...you.”

At this, the little girl fell back into her pillow with a great sigh of relief. She grinned from ear to ear and the father leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. He rose from the bed and stood in the doorway. The snow was still falling, the earth covered in a blanket of white that glowed by the light of the moon.

“It's Friday,” she said.

“And Sunday's on the way,” he replied.

“Goodnight, Dad,” she whispered.

“Yes, indeed,” he thought. “It is a *good* night.” And as he stood in the doorway with his hand on the doorknob, he thought of blood and water and of God's promise to Zechariah: “I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy,” says our God. “...On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.”

So he smiled while his daughter thought of wine and water and the snow, clean and fresh, fell outside.

And that, dear children of Zion, is The End.