

MERCY
and the
NEFARIOUS FOREST

P.E. Thistlebold

for
Kirsten Marie Iverson

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Mercy
and the
Nefarious Forest



Their storytree rose

in a sunny meadow of tall grasses and sweet blossoming jasmine. The Princess was already lounging on her listening branch which swayed near the ground. She waited for her little friend, the storyteller.

He scurried along his well-worn branch and stopped near her. The little hedgehog raised himself on hind paws, straightened his tweed waistcoat over little round belly and with grave eyes behind half-moon specs, he hesitated.

“My tale today begins most grievously,” he warned her. His tiny quilled eyebrows pushed together. Doctor Thistlevold continued, “The hero of our tale, begins abandoned and being abandoned, my dear, is loneliness compressed to despair.” He let her appreciate the severe tale to come. “But that is where we must begin. For without first planting my tale in the filth of despair, nothing extraordinary can later bloom.”

The Princess lounged back in her mossy branch saying, “I understand, Doctor.”

The little hedgehog gave his peculiar pert nod and adjusted his tweed waistcoat. He cleared his throat and said, “Once upon a time there was a little girl who was not a little girl.”

Doctor Thistlevold began his tale:

Mercy Tendersole was her name and she ran for her life. A bone-munching troll crashed through trees behind her, frenzied by her scent. Troll’s scream-shriek wailed again, driving Mercy’s legs faster. Branches and brambles ripped her blouse and scraped her face. She tripped and slammed to the dirt.

Scrambling back up, she leaped off the path. Down the hill through briar and brush she plummeted.

The confused troll barreled his way up the hill and over the rise. The crashing trees and splintering wood rampaged away. His double-dank tang cleared from the air as Troll thundered off.

Shaking, shivering, Mercy collapsed behind a tree infected with boils. Her wild eyes darted. She clasped her hands against her mouth to stifle her screams and the poor dear wept.

And wept and she wept.

Her hair, usually waving in glossy brown unison, was now bedraggled with burrs and bits of forest. Legs and arms were scraped. Her white blouse that she had just ironed was ripped and soaked with grime and fear.

Earlier this morning, before being chased by Troll, Stepfather sped her in his little jaunting cart to the forest edge. Gripping her bench, she worried, “I hope I don’t bounce out...”

“Hope’s no good, Lass!” he shouted over galloping horse. “Hold a tight grip ‘cause hope’ll just break your neck and heart!”

“Life is made sweeter by hope, Stepfather.”

“Listen!” he barked. “The most delicious bashfulberries in all the kingdom grow just inside this forest.” He yanked the reins back. His horse nearly sat at the tall fence of trees. Stepfather shoved Mercy out. “Berries are shy so be quick!” Bolting away, he yelled back, “If you do return, mark you bring me a full basket of bashfulberries!”

“I have no basket, stepfath...” He had already rushed off, abandoning Mercy to the Nefarious Forest where many enter but few come out.

On her first step inside the forest, the collywobbles churned. On her fifth step in, she still found no berries. And on her tenth step, the poor girl was completely disoriented.

“Is this forest infested with monsters?” she wondered and searched. “If Troll catches wind I’m here, he’ll ravage this morsel, I fear.”

And then she heard Troll’s first scream-shriek. It drove her heart and legs to race and path puddles to tremble.

Now, still weeping behind that infected tree, Mercy couldn’t smell Troll’s double-dank stench. His scream-shriek was more distant.

Through her tears she saw a deep green dragonfly. It had ruby eyes and pterostigma making it look very much like a delicate Christmas

ornament. It fluttered up to her face, marveling at Mercy, its wings abuzz and a blur. Then it flew down to alight on the edge of a mud pool. Only now did Mercy notice the mud was alive with insects. The small dragonfly took in a deep breath and blew out a ribbon of fire to incinerate a patch of bugs. It darted in and gnawed on their writhing remains.

Mercy leapt to her feet and stifled another scream. She scrambled back to the path which branched in many directions. Picking her way, she began. “Finding Stepfather’s berries,” she said to the lonely path, “may be hopeless.”

The path she chose slithered down into a hollow where looming trees wept black moss. They blocked the sun from warming the soft ground. A glowing miasma lashed at her ankles.

Her throat was dry from racing and fear so she stopped at a tree and ran her slender fingers through tree’s thick moss. Squeezing her hand above her mouth, she drank. The water was sweeter than snowmelt and refreshed the abandoned girl’s painful throat. She didn’t know it but this particular moss water also fortifies Hope, especially for those abandoned.

At the bottom of that same tree, Mercy found a small snail housed in a bright orange shell. He also struggled alone.

The poor mite labored to climb through thick moss, fearfully muttering to himself. Mercy knelt down to ask, “May I help you, Sir?”

He sucked himself into his shell and wept, “Do not devour me just yet!”

She gently picked him from his moss forest. Her cupped hands cradled him in front of her gold-flecked face. Up slid his eyestalks part way. Ooze glooped from his shell. His small voice appealed, “You’ll not gulp me down?”

“Not even a taste,” she promised.

His eyestalks slid higher. More goo drooped and pooled in her hands. He conceded, “I’m afraid I’m very delicious.”

She smiled, “All the more reason to keep you safe.”

Out he plumed, a gelatinous gray body. Between his eyestalks, a tuft of orange feathers sprouted. His tiny shell rode high atop his bulk like an orange bubble. How he could fit himself inside is beyond reason.

Snail was very brave to stare into Mercy’s giant face from her hands. He implored, “I am abandoned! Please. Can you please help me find my heartsong!”

“Your who?”

“*She Who Makes My Heart to Sing* has climbed ahead and left me. My eyes, though tall and proud, cannot see over this towering moss. Can you help me find her before raptors flock to feast on my mighty foot?” He leaned to one side to show off his tiny foot. “Please?” he squeaked.

“But if I stay to help you,” she warned, “I may never save myself from bone-munching trolls.”

“When reunited,” continued Snail, “I shall sing her my love-life’s lullaby.”

So Mercy thought and wondered and wondered and thought and what do you think she did?

The little hedgehog paused his tale to give his Princess a choice in story’s direction. He asked her, “What choose you, Dear? Should this lost girl prolong her own agony to help this escargot? Or should she leave him lost to find her own way out of the Nefarious Forest?”

The Princess smiled from her cozy moss covered branch. She said, “Please, Doctor. Let Mercy help this heartsick snail.”

“Then bye and buy and by and such is life, Mercy helped this delicious snail.”

The Princess looked at her friend. She raised her eyebrows and said, “‘Delicious’, Doctor?” She gave him a mocking leer, “‘Escargot’?”

“Pity,” the bespectacled hedgehog muttered. “Shallot and garlic sweating in a touch of butter, layered in sauce rémoulade de Provence would really make this heartsick snail sing!”

Percival pressed on with his tale in the direction his Princess chose:

Smiling into his outstretched eyestalks, Mercy whispered to Snail, “I vow to stay here until we find your heartsong together.”

The tiny orange shell fairly quivered with joy.

Mercy perched him atop her shoulder where he oozed some more and they searched together. While her fingers combed the moss low and high and all in between, she asked him, “Do you little creatures sing a lot?”

“Constantly. Don’t you big creatures?” he asked, carefully watching for his partner.

“Not if we’re lost and abandoned in the deepest part of the darkest forest, no we do not sing.”

“Oh, my Dear,” soothed Snail. He stretched his soft stalks down to pat her shoulder, “Lost and alone in the deepest part of the darkest forest is why music was born.”



The forest grew darker but Mercy had vowed and vows must be preserved. Searching beneath moss, she found a foul and pestilent thing, a troll claw. It was gouged deep in tree's wood and still Mercy searched.

Then she heard another troll scream-shriek just over path's rise. Her fingers quickened.

Standing on toes to reach up the trunk, she found what he longed for. Gently holding her small friend up, she whispered, "Here. Sing your love-life's lullaby."

Snail fairly vibrated and shook, "Thank you kind heart. Thank you!" he squeaked. "You're not alone in this forest. I am with you!"

She put the two snails together and at once they slithered close. Their eyestalks entwined as did their hymn of joy.

Her vow now complete, Mercy left the singing shells and slogged her way through the thick wood. Distant troll wails forced her arm hairs to bristle and imagination to terrify.

She tried Snail's lesson and quietly sang herself a small tune. As it was born of fear, her music came out minor, adding more creep than comfort.

Following path crossings, twistings and turnings, she came to a babbling brook where she sat to dip her tired toes. Near Mercy, Fish lay out of water, gasping near death. His scales had lost all their sparkle. His useless gill flapped up and down and his staring eye had begun to glaze.

Fish writhed and burred to her, "Hope lost! Toss me back in my less than dry home," he wheezed. "Eternally grateful I'll be."

She looked into his listless eye and considered. "My stomach cramps from hunger and you'd make a sumptuous meal," she confessed. "But losing your home must fill you with fright." So she thought and wondered and wondered and thought and what do you think she did?

The hedgehog peered over his half-moon specs teetering at the end of his black-tipped snout, “Fish lay gasping, Highness.” He asked, “What shall this hungry girl do?”

“Please, Percival. I mean, ‘Doctor Thistlebold...’”

“Tut, tut,” he humbled, interlacing tiny fingers atop his belly.

Thinking aloud, Princess said, “She’s famished but Fish is without home, without family or friend...” She considered, “I suppose...” She considered some more. “Oh bother!” She finally declared, “Let her toss poor Fish back into his watery house.”

“If that is your choice, Dear,” he said. The thorny doctor’s black bulbous eyes glistened with pride at her. “Then bye and buy and by and such is life, she tossed poor Fish back into his watery house.”

Doctor Thistlebold resumed his tale:

Mercy lifted the near dead fish. Both eyes were now dull. She stood in the brook and plunged him nose-first in the current. She even propped his mouth open with her finger. His little teeth drew a drop of her blood, which threaded past his gills and filled his tiny heart.

Fish lay stiff in her hand. She thought he was lost. Then quick as a wish he wriggled free and frolicked back in his babbling house. Fish flushed glorious water over his gills. He lifted his head from brook to gargle, “Thank you for reuniting me with my less than dry home, even though you’re empty hungry. May I suggest you feast on a less meaty acquaintance? Perhaps a great dollop of *bubble and squeak* may satiate.”

“But sir. What’s ‘bubble and squeak?’” Mercy asked.

He exclaimed, “Oh My Dear Girl!”

Fish then launched into his vaudeville waltz—

BUBBLE & SQUEAK WALTZ

FISH: Bubble & Squeak. Dear Bubble & Squeak.
I love to speak of Bubble & Squeak.
Killing's not fun just to fill your tum-tum.

MERCY: Promise you'll shun the humdrum of meat.

“Hey Girl! Grab your lute and you can strum.”

“Hey Fish! My fingers don't strum.”

“Who cares! My voice don't sung!”

FISH & Bubble & Squeak. Dear Bubble & Squeak.
MERCY I love to speak of Bubble & Squeak.
Someone's plump son should never become
a feast or a treat...

MERCY: Have a soft sweet-

FISH: Take a retreat

MERCY: from barbecue heat-

FISH: Do not eat Pete-

MERCY: Try a fresh beet-

FISH: Something discreet

FISH & who's had no heartbeat
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MERCY: Bubble & Squeeeeeeeeeeeak!

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Fish splashed towards Mercy, saying, “I am with you!” He whirled round and off he swam beneath ripples and foam into his less than dry home.



Alone again, Mercy wriggled into her socks and shoes. She trudged back where hurt lurks, poison pounces and misery munches.

By fading moonlight, she found a troll footprint in path's mud. She knelt to examine it. Inside the foul print, hordes of troll toe spores sprouted. Red fungal filaments flourished to tangle and strangle their siblings.



Still kneeling, Mercy looked up from troll's print. Blocking her path was a ravenous wolf. Of course there's a wolf. What's a tale without a wolf or, for that matter, a wolf without a tail? Both are underdeveloped, forlorn. So, yes. Here's a wolf.

He curdled his snout, trembled his lips. Foam sputtered from his fang-filled mouth. Red eyes were incandescent beneath his blood-matted black fur and this time, this time Mercy feared her hope would surely die.

Wolf snapped and snarled spraying lather on the abandoned girl. He growled, "Hunter stole my pups to make for his coat. I'm held fast by his biting snare! Help me and I may not devour you, my dear."

Cautiously rising, Mercy was mesmerized by Wolf's deep bright teeth in this deep dark forest. She stammered, "I'm not delicious."

"Flavor," he salivated, "has nothing to do with compulsion."

Mercy realized, "You'll kill me."

"I may," said Wolf. "Yes. You're right, my dear. I may. Then again...? Help me or no, you'll never be the same. That I pledge."

Being wild, he couldn't help taking a ravenous lunge towards her. He was held back by her hope, fortified by the tree moss water and his snare.

The poor girl feared being ripped and ravaged but she knew Wolf was filled with double pain: pain for paw and pain for pups.

She thought and wondered and wondered and thought and what do you think she did?

The little hedgehog paused his tale now turned tumultuous. He stood on hind paws to look into the face of his Princess. The Doctor straightened his waistcoat over full, little tummy. As if Heaven and Hell depended on her answer, he asked, "What choose you, Princess?"

"I don't know," she said, thinking dilemma through. "If Mercy helps him, Wolf may snap at her hand and cause it to pain. Or worse!"

Doctor Percival raised his prickly eyebrows, wondering.

Princess looked into her little friend's black marble eyes. Her eyes also twinkled back to him. A grin spread across her lips when she announced, "But what's hand pain when compared to Wolf's pups?"

The hedgehog nodded his peculiar pert bow. "Your kindness binds us." His proud smile was so wide, he could hardly get out, "Bye and buy and by and such is life, she loosened frantic Wolf free."

"Did he snap?"

The good doctor merely smiled back, admiring her impassioned face, the gold-flecked bridge of her nose, her sensitive soul. He let her question loiter, her concern grow. He slid his specs back up his thin snout and he shrugged.

"Did. He. Snap?" Princess insisted.

Doctor Thistlebold smiled and chuckled and relinquished all at once. "He did *not* bite her helping hand!"

"Well? What happened?" she demanded.

Percival continued his tale:

Before Wolf limped away to free his cubs, he lingered to say, “My, what a big heart you have.”

“All the better to help you with, my dear.” Mercy could only summon a limp smile and counterfeit chuckle in the face of nightmare set free.

Wolf’s insatiable eyes studied Mercy. He asked, “Why? Why would you help your enemy?” He circled her, inhaling long drafts of her terror which illustrated for him Mercy’s every fear. “Why help me?” His mouth drooled from instinct at such lush succulence but not for all the fangs in his head could he now harm this exceptional girl.

For the first time, she took her eyes off Wolf to look about. Seeing no one else, Mercy answered him, “If not me, sir, then who?”

The beast was helpless. His life of aggression and domination did not prepare him for Mercy. He could only stare at the young girl. If he had fingers he would have rubbed his moist eyes. Wolf quietly rumbled, “Remarkable... I sheepishly submit to your sermon: not all humans hate.” Still studying her eyes, he slowly bestowed upon Mercy a very low bow which became a tail-tucked crouch. He breathed, “I am with you,” and off he sprang.

When Wolf scampered away, the girl continued her wandering, wondering where in the world she was. The moon had disappeared. She asked herself, “Can Troll smell in the dark?”

Remembering the children’s rhyme and peering from tree to tree, Mercy chanted, “Old Troll is a godless fiend. Never let him know where you might be seen.” She chanted and remembered finding the sharp troll claw. She remembered hearing close troll moans and smelling double-dank troll tang.

Bitter cold night became eerily translucent as dawn prepared to spring and still she trudged up hills and slipped down hollows. She clambered another great crest. She didn't know it but climbing that last hill, Mercy somehow wove her way between sleeping nests of hungry trolls who tussled as they dreamt of her sweet passing scent.

Her leg muscles had worked themselves into a pudding. She struggled up the final reach higher than trees dared grow. Cresting that ridge, she saw yet another peak still above. She collapsed and wept, "No one. No hope. Nothing."

Beneath the light indigo sky, Mercy lay, face-down in tall grass. She wept. Between sobs, she imagined she heard a soft tinkling- like a murmuring mother- like a warm home at long day's close- like children whispering their laughter. Tinkling blossomed into music from the hilltop peak. Music that was both bitter and sweet all at once washed over her. Weeping startled away. Music dried her face, caressed her worn-down hope. Buoyant music lifted her from dirt and dew to set her standing among patches of snow and clumps of daffodils.

Facing Mercy in meadow's center, standing as tall as a man, a magnificent bird smoldered in red-orange feathers of crystal. They dazzled her in the up rising sun.

Bird ruffled his crystals for her. They chimed a magical medley. His voice was a tremendous fire, "Welcome, child." Cinders fell below while gold sparks swirled above him, "This basket waits for you."

Not at all certain, Mercy hesitated, "Thank you, sir."

She stepped to the basket. She picked it up and saw. Basket was filled with juicy bashfulberries. She grabbed a handful and pushed them straight into her mouth. Unabashed of mess, she managed, "Oh, thank you, sir!"

Watching her devour the berries, he rumbled, "Wolf is correct. You truly are remarkable."

Talking around her mouth filled with sweet berry mush, “I simply help those in need, sir.” She spoke and swallowed and chewed all at once. “What could you possibly require?”

“I require my forest filled with love-life’s lullaby,” Bird rumbled. “I require a welcoming home. I require safe pups.”

She remembered all she had chosen and knew. Mercy swallowed and knew and said, “Sir. I am with you.”

Bird bowed regally before her and waited, murmuring, “In this forest of castoffs, mercy is cherished.”

She clutched her basket of berries and climbed on his back. His powerful wings lifted them both in a parallel symphony of movement and music. Only now, safe at last, did Mercy realize she was utterly drained of limb and soul. Lying, holding, slowly munching, somewhat swallowing, Mercy’s fears evaporated. Her eyes fluttered closed. The poor dear slept.

And slept and she slept.

Bird carried her out, over the deepest, darkest forest and back to her home where she demanded Stepfather never again abandon her in the Nefarious Forest. “And here’s for you, Stepfather,” she declared. “Hope keeps life and love alive!”

With his tale finished, the little hedgehog looked at his precious Princess lounging in the crook of her mossy tree limb.

She rose to her elbows and asked, “Was that the moral?”

Doctor Thistlebold thought. He smiled. One prickly eyebrow crinkled up when he said, “For this tale’s moral, dear, you need go no further than your mirror.”

Not at all certain, she smiled back at her thorny friend anyway. She nodded. She closed her eyes, still nodding. The Princess sank back to let moss and fern enfold her. She asked, “May I nap here, Doctor Thistlebold?”

“Please, Dear.”

“You’ll stay?”

“I shall keep sentry and sniff out danger.” He raised his narrow snout into the breeze.

She would have smiled at her stoic friend had she not already drifted asleep.

Unbuttoning his small waistcoat, the dapper doctor draped his Harris Tweed over a tiny area of her shoulder. He watched her closed eyes flutter. He watched her silent lips. He watched his lounging friend and he thought, “What a lucky hedgehog am I.”

Leaning towards her sleeping ear, he breathed, “I am always with you.”





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Doctor Percival E. Thistlebold was not always a doctor. He grew up in a bramble where he scrambled for snails and insects leaving him full yet unfulfilled. He tried his paw at All Souls, Oxford where he read Latin, The Classics and Theology. Now he lives in an old mole hole that he has refurbished quite comfortably. He cherishes venturing out to visit his Princess.

