

Neringa Dangvydė

AMBER HEART



Vilnius, 2020

UDK 821.172-93
Da232



ISBN 978-609-95690-0-0
ISBN 978-9955-473-19-0

Illustration copyright © Neringa Dangvyde
Original cover design by Egle Jurkunaite
Layout by Egle Jurkunaite
Translated from Lithuanian by Laura Demoi, Jurgita Sajevidiene, Virginija Jakutyte-Symanska
Editor Neringa Dangvyde
Editor of English translation Kerry Kubilius

TURINYS



The Girl with White Gloves.....	5
The Magic Violin.....	17
Child of joy.....	31
The Three Princes' Search for Wisdom.....	43
The Princess, the Shoemaker's Daughter, and the Twelve Brothers.....	65
The Amber Heart.....	85
About the book	98



THE GIRL WITH WHITE GLOVES



Once upon a time, there was an old man and old woman who lived in a cozy cabin with painted shutters. Only they did not have children and were therefore very sad.

One rainy evening, somebody knocked on the door. A beggar stood at the threshold. The elderly couple welcomed him in, settled him at the table, gave him pancakes with jam to eat, and offered him a place to sleep.

In the morning, the beggar said, “Thank you very much for giving me a place to stay when I was cold and feeding me when I was hungry. Now, ask me anything you want and I will make your wish come true.

“There is nothing we lack except for hearing a child’s laughter,” said the old lady.

“This desire is easy for me to fulfill,” the beggar said. He pulled a small glass plate and a golden needle from his patchwork bag. “Now, give me your hands.”

He pricked their fingers with the needle and added two drops of blood onto the glass plate.

“Now, put this plate on the windowsill and wait.”

The beggar then went on his way.

The elderly couple waited one day, then two. The third day, as the plate was lit by the sun shining through the window, they saw a little baby rocking as if on the waves of the ocean.

The elderly couple rejoiced. They made pancakes and waited until the baby grew up. The baby waved her hand at them.



A day later, the glass cracked and a little girl jumped out. She grew up in hours rather than in years. She laughed a lot, and her laughter sounded like a small silver bell.

Soon, the girl looked like any other six-year-old. It was time for her to go to school to learn about the world and to find new friends.

Yet the old man and old woman were anxious. The girl was odd—she was born with mahogany hands.

Her hands were scaly, tough like tree bark, and very strong. She could lift a wagon full of wood with a little finger or crush a stone in her palms. Perhaps this special characteristic was also a gift from the beggar because the elderly couple was too old for farm work.

So the old man and old woman deliberated and decided that the girl should attend school. Mahogany hands would not prevent the girl from learning to read and write. She could wield a hatchet, so a pen would not give her any problems.

However, the old woman sewed her long white gloves that reached almost to the girl's shoulders.

“They’re uncomfortable,” said the girl.



“But they are lovely,” the old woman answered. “And nobody will notice the color of your hands. There are no children with mahogany hands in our village.”

She put some spare pairs of gloves into a bag in case the first pair got wet or dirty. They explained to the teacher that the girl’s hands were very sensitive and could tolerate neither heat nor cold.

“Poor thing. It is not easy for her in the countryside,” the teacher said. She placed the girl in the front row and promised to take good care of her.

The girl studied hard. As soon as she learned to write letters, she perfected calligraphy. She could find any country on a map. But she had a problem making friends with other children.

They surrounded her and began to tease.

“Glove girl!”

“Miss Priss!”

“Teacher’s pet!”

“Village princess!”

The girl lost her temper and pulled off the gloves. Everybody saw that her hands were mahogany, scaly, and tough like old tree branch.

“A witch!” someone shouted.

“Let’s stone her to death!” encouraged the biggest bully in the class.

But nobody lifted a stone. They were afraid that the “witch” would put a spell on them and ran away in all directions.

The girl was left alone in the middle of the yard. She did not return to the schoolroom.



She went home, locked herself in the woodshed, and looked at her hands for a long time. She could not understand why it was wrong that her hands were different from those of the other children.

Her heart was very heavy.

The girl looked around and noticed a hatchet.

“What if I lop off my hands?” she wondered.

This would not work. After all, she could lop only one hand off and the other would remain. She would not want to die,

either, because the old couple who cared for her would be too sad. Who would help them to chop wood? Who would dig the garden?

The girl sat in the woodshed until night came. The old man found her there crying. He took her home, poured her a glass of milk, and listened to her story.

“I told you not to take off the gloves,” said the old lady, patting the girl’s head. “It would be better if they call you Miss Priss rather than a witch. Now everybody will be afraid of you.”

“Grandma, could we go to Africa? I saw in a picture that all the people are black there.”

“Yes, they are black. But you have only mahogany hands. You will be a stranger there as well.”

The girl paused.

“How did I get here if not from Africa? Maybe my parents lost me when they saw my mahogany hands? And you felt sorry for me and took me in?”

“No, my sweetheart, you are ours. You were born from our same blood, but in a different way than other children are born.

“So, I am magic?”

“Every person in the world is special in their own way.”

“Even those children who teased me and then became scared?”

“Even them. They did so because they do not know you well. They saw your white gloves and decided to call you Miss Priss. They do not know how much you help us,” the old man explained.

“I sewed the gloves with love and wanted them to be nice for you, just like the ones princesses have,” the old woman added. “Don’t be angry with them.”

“But now they think I am a witch,” said the girl.

“You should speak with your teacher. She is clever and will find a solution.”



The next morning at an early hour, the girl put on the gloves and went to school.

She talked to the teacher.

When the children started to arrive, she sat quietly at her desk.

Everybody was anxious but did not dare to do anything in the presence of the teacher.

“Let’s start the lesson,” the teacher said. “I have just heard that we have a witch in our class.”

The class went suddenly silent.

“Come to the board,” the teacher said to the girl.

The girl stood up in front of the class. It was very scary but the teacher smiled encouragingly. The girl took off her gloves and showed them to the other students.

“Look—they are mahogany,” she said, showing her hands from all sides. “And rough! It is much easier to climb trees with such hands.”

A quiet laugh was heard. It was not a wicked one. A boy who was known as Piggy-Wiggy and who spent more time in the apple tree than on ground laughed.

As you may know, when somebody starts to laugh, other people begin to relax.

“I wish I had hands like that. They would help me climb trees better!”

“I wish my legs would be so strong!” a girl exclaimed. “Maybe this would help me to jump higher!”

“Me too! Me too!” clamored the children.

The teacher wrapped on the table.

“I am glad to hear you say that,” she said after the children quieted down. “But you do not have such hands or legs. And witches do. What can a witch do with such hands?”

“The same things that other people do,” one girl answered. “Weed a garden. Chop wood and put it in the woodshed. Do other jobs. Write.”

“So there is nothing magic in this,” said one of the biggest bullies in the class. “What kind of witch are you then?”

“I don’t know,” the girl shrugged. “A simple one.”

“Why did you wear gloves?”

“Because I was afraid of you,” admitted the girl. “I did not know what you would say after seeing my hands.”

“Do not be afraid now,” one of the children said. “We are not monsters, and we are not going to harm you. Don’t

hide your hands. It's much more comfortable without the gloves."

The girl still sometimes wore her white gloves. After all, the old woman had made them with love. What's more, she made many colored pairs of gloves for all the children in the class. They put the gloves on during their lessons, and when the teacher asked a question, they raised a colorful forest of hands.

Translated by *Jurgita Sajevičienė*





THE MAGIC VIOLIN



Once there was a little girl. She had two homes. Sometimes she lived at her mom's place and sometimes at her dad's. Anytime she spent a night at her dad's place, her mom would come to pick her up to take her to her violin classes at the music school. And whenever the girl would sleep at her mom's house, her mom... Well, she would still drive her to the music school because her dad did not have a driving license.

The girl's dad was a hairstylist. He had a beauty salon on the ground floor of his house. The girl loved to watch her dad working. She couldn't decide whether she should become a hairstylist like her dad or a musician like her mom. Her mother travelled a lot and the girl dreamed of visiting all the countries her

mother had. The girl diligently practiced her violin. And when she wasn't practicing, she styled her dolls. She'd try different hairdos on them, but most of the time, the dolls eventually ended up with no hair at all.

One time, the girl was staying at her dad's house and something unusual happened. Her mom phoned her early in the morning and said she wouldn't be picking her up for violin classes that day because she had to leave unexpectedly. The dad, of course, couldn't drive her to violin class. He could not walk her there, either, since there was a cute little old lady already sitting in his hairdressing chair waiting for her hair to be nicely styled.

"Well," the dad said to the girl, "the music school isn't that far from our house anyway. And your mom picked you up for the classes because she loved spending mornings with you. You are all grown up and can find your way to the music school. But remember, the main path might seem shorter, but the road around the woods is actually the quicker route. And, please, do not chat with every single stray cat you meet or you will be late for your class."

The girl combed her hair, picked up her violin, and took off for class.

And, of course, just around the corner she met a stray cat.

“Hello there, little girl,” said the cat. “Where are you off to?”



“Hello, cat,” the girl answered, practicing her good manners. “I am off to the music school.”

“Oh, I see. And what is that lovely smell coming from your backpack?” asked the cat.

“It’s my lunch—some cured sausage.”

“Oh, my, and I am so, so hungry. I haven’t had even a bite to eat for several days now,” said the cat.

The girl had a good heart, so she took her lunchbox out of her backpack and gave the sausage to the cat.



After the cat finished eating, the girl played with it for a little while. Then the girl suddenly remembered she was on her way to the music school.

“Oh no! I’ll be late for my class!” she said, sadly.

“No you won’t,” said the cat. “See that path? Run real fast through the woods and you will be at your music school in no time.”

“But my dad specifically said to take the road around. I suppose there might be monsters or some other scary creatures living along the path through the woods.”

“And what sort of monsters could you possibly meet in the middle of the day?” asked the cat. “I have strolled these woods at night, and even then I have never, ever seen a single monster there. Perhaps your daddy is afraid you may stumble upon wild strawberries, start picking them, and miss your classes.”

“There are wild strawberries in there?” the girl asked. She really liked wild strawberries.

“Yes, oh yes, there are ! But you just run and don’t look around. These wild strawberries are still going to be there on your way back home after class. Enough chatting, already! Run! Hurry!”

Well, that’s good advice, the girl thought to herself. She thanked the cat and took off straight through the woods. But soon enough, she stopped in surprise. She had arrived at not the

music school but at a small village in the middle of the woods. And next to one of the tiny cottages there was a boy sitting and whistling.

Guess I got lost after all, the girl thought to herself. It's that or I accidentally entered a fairy tale.

"Hello," she said as she approached the boy.

"Hi," the boy answered.

"Where am I? What is this place?" the girl inquired.

"Are you from the city?" the boy asked. "This is our *tabor**."

"What is a *ta-bor*?"

"It's our home. We live here," the boy explained. "What do you have here? Show me."

"It's my violin," the girl said. "I am taking classes at the music school. One day I will learn to play it and then I will be able to travel the world."

* "The term "tabor" is still used to this day to describe settlements/ghettos of Romani people (also referred to as Roma people) in Lithuania and some post-soviet countries. Because of the social misconceptions and prejudice Romani communities become outcasts, which is especially hard on Romani children. In Vilnius, Lithuania, there is an infamous Parubanka tabor, located within the industrial district of Kirtimai."

“I also want to travel the world,” said the boy. “I know that back in the day, my people travelled a lot. So, is your violin magic? Does it take you anywhere in the world when you play it?”

“No. It’s not like that, exactly. After you learn to play it well you are invited to play concerts in different cities around the world. Just like mother is. She travels a lot. That is why she and my dad live separately. But I can live with my dad while she is away, and every time my mom is back, I can live with her. I have two houses, you see.”

“My mom and dad, me and my seven brothers and sisters, we all live in one house.”

“That must be fun!” the girl said.

“Sometimes. But other times we fight a bit. It happens, you know,” the boy shrugged. “Could I try and play your violin? My dad has one, but no one is allowed to touch it.”

“My mom has a violin like that too. And only on very rare occasions does she allow me to hold it. But I am only allowed

to practice and play my violin.” She thought for a moment. “Alright, give it a try. I am already late for my class anyway.”

The boy took the violin and started to play. And suddenly the most incredible thing happened. The girl closed her eyes and felt herself lift into the air. And there she was, flying high above the woods, over the city and the fields. She saw lakes and rivers and people down below. And everything was extremely beautiful—way, way more beautiful than any concert hall.

After the music stopped, the girl opened her eyes and she was back again in the very same spot she was when the boy started playing.

“How did you do it?” the girl asked in surprise. “Did you see the woods and lakes and rivers from above, too?”

“I just imagined them in great detail and the rest was the violin. The violin showed all of this to you. I guess it is magic after all. I would love to have one like that.”

“And you can. All you need is to attend the music school.”

The boy hesitated. “But I do not even attend a regular school.”

“What? Don’t tell me there are kids that do not go to school!”

“Yes, there are. My brothers and sisters do not go, either. Well, we have been there a few times, but...”

“Didn’t you like it?”

“I kind of liked learning new things. It is quite interesting. It is just that other kids do not want to be friends with us. They call us names. They call us gypsies and lazies and thieves. They say we do not shower. But we simply have darker skin, that’s all.”

“You aren’t thieves, are you?”

“Well, have you ever forgotten a pencil or an eraser? And you just used someone else’s instead?”

“Yes, but I just asked other kids and they lent it to me.”

“No kid never did that for us. And they never wanted to be friends with us. That is why we had to take things when they were not looking.”

“Well, that is not the right thing to do. In that case, you should ask our teachers to help. They would be glad to.”

“It is too embarrassing to ask the teacher every time. They might start to think we do not try at all. And in fact, we *are* lazies. We always lose or forget things.”

“No they wouldn’t. Teachers know that things can happen. You know what? I will ask my music teacher if you can come. And if it is okay, I will tell the rest of the kids to be friends with you.”

The boy got very excited. He walked the girl to the edge of the woods, where they could already see the music school.



The girl showed up at the music school at the very end of the class. Her teacher and her dad were waiting for her, both looking extremely worried. Her dad hugged her tightly.

“Where have you been? What was I thinking? I almost called the police. I shouldn’t have let you walk all by yourself!”

“No, Daddy, it is actually a very good thing that you did.”

And the girl told them everything that happened that day. She began her story with the talking cat. Which, of course, no one believed. But when she mentioned the boy from the *tabor* who played the violin so well, the teacher nodded.

“Yes, they live nearby in these woods. I am not too sure about the music school, but school in general would be a great idea for these kids. Maybe they can find a way to adjust. However, you could talk with your new friend about the possibility of coming here for music classes after school. That would be really great.”

The girl walked back to the *tabor* with her dad. He said he would like to talk with the boy’s parents. After all, if the boy’s mom and dad didn’t agree to send the boy to school, he wasn’t going to attend at all. But all went well. In addition, all of his brothers and sisters decided to start after-school music classes too. Well, all except for the baby brother. He was too small and for the time being and knew only how to scream and cry. However, sometimes that could almost pass for singing.

A few of the boy's siblings joined dance and fine art classes. Though to be fair, they skipped a few sometimes. But we all have lazy days, don't we?

No one bullied the kids from the *tabor* anymore. The girl told everyone in her school that it is silly and simply not right to pick on someone just because they are a bit different from you. She wanted them to know that you can be friends with anyone despite having differences.



On the very first day, the music teacher listened to the boy's playing and said that the violin wasn't actually magic—the boy was simply gifted. After all, he could play without knowing how to read notes. And after the girl's mother returned from her tour, she asked if she could give the boy a present. She brought him a brand new violin.

The boy didn't want to take it at first. "Maybe the girl would like to take this new violin and give me her old one instead?"

"I would like this very much," said the girl with excitement. "But wouldn't it be rude to give you my old violin when you could have a new one?"

"Your old violin is very dear to me. It is magical. We would have never become friends if I hadn't played it."

"Or if I hadn't had taken the cat's advice to take the shortcut," the girl added. But, of course, no one believed her story about the talking cat.

Translated by *Laura Demoi*





CHILD OF JOY



Once upon a time, there was a king and queen. They lacked nothing except for children. Both felt their old age approaching with a veil of dread: there would be no one to pass their kingdom to. Eventually, they went to see a fortune teller.

The fortune teller looked at the king and queen, gazed into the crystal ball, peered again at the hopeful couple and said, “In one year’s time the queen will have a baby, a child of pure joy. But the child will lose the kingdom as soon as they grow up. I can tell you nothing more.”

The king and queen returned home puzzled. The king was especially worried. He was a truly fine sovereign and could not think of how or why his own child, a child of pure joy, should or could lose his kingdom.

The queen, seeing the king torn with worry, said, “The child isn’t even born yet, and look at you! You have already begun to worry. We will figure everything out after the child is born. We will have the best tutors so our child grows up wise and knows how to rule our kingdom properly. It will be alright as long as the child has a good head on their shoulders.”

And so, it was just like the fortune teller said. In one year’s time, the king and queen had a boy. Festive flags were hoisted into the air and unfurled. The whole kingdom came to congratulate their future king. However, everyone could see that there was something peculiar about the child. He seemed different from other babies. Days passed, and while he learned to smile, he struggled to speak. He started to walk and explore his surroundings but ignored everyone’s commands. It almost seemed that he didn’t want to or could not understand what anybody was trying to tell him.



Doctors were called to the castle. They weighed and measured the child and checked his ears and eyes. His hearing was fine. However, everyone agreed the child needed glasses.

“I myself have worn glasses since my early childhood and it has never interfered with my ruling of the kingdom,” said the king.

The doctors nodded. Besides the glasses, there was nothing else they could do. They could only advise the king and queen to hire the best teachers there were. That way, perhaps, the child could begin to learn about the world.

There was not much else the king and queen could do. So, they made an announcement: anyone who could encourage their child speak would receive half of the kingdom.

At first, hundreds of teachers and tutors flooded the castle. Everyone was eager to get half of the kingdom. But the child did not start to speak. He only laughed and giggled more and louder than ever before. In all fairness, the queen enjoyed watching her child giggling and chasing butterflies and examining flowers in the royal garden. She would catch herself thinking how nice it would be if he’d stay that way and never grow up.



Years passed, and fewer and fewer tutors wanted to teach the boy. To be completely honest, the boy did learn a few words and could form simple sentences. He could say if he was hungry and if it was too hot or too cold. He called a table “a table” and not “a chair.” But the king and queen were not thrilled. The boy’s twelfth birthday was approaching—the day when, according to the old tradition, a big fancy ball would be held and the prince would make his first public appearance as the future heir to the throne and appear in the main capital square in front of all the people of his kingdom. But the future king acted like a five-year-old. Besides, his parents raised him away from the other children, dreading the thought of some child coming back home and telling their parents that the prince was “a bit strange.” However, all these efforts did not stop people from talking. They

found it odd that their own children were never invited to play in the royal garden. After all, when the prince was born, all the gates were left wide open and every child was allowed to come in and rock the royal cradle. But one day, guards were placed at the gate and it was announced that the prince was in poor health. And no one had seen the royal child since. Therefore, it was not a surprise that the whole kingdom was greatly anticipating his first official public appearance.

The king was devastated. He started to push his son away every time the boy tried to hug him. Eventually, he began to avoid the boy. The king would turn in the hall or take a different path in the royal garden so as not to face his own son.

One day, somebody knocked at the gate. It was a teacher from the village. Her son was training to become a royal chef. One weekend he came back home to visit his mother and told her all about the young king. “You were able to find a way with the naughtiest kids, calm them down and teach them everything you know. If you can’t help the prince, then no one can.”



The king and queen greeted her with open arms. It had been a while since the last tutor had visited their castle. The teacher was taken to see the boy. The prince gave a childish giggle when he saw her. The king and queen held their breath while observing the meeting. The teacher took out a harmonica and started to play. The boy began to cheer. He hadn't been seen so happy for some time. The queen began to smile and seeing that, the King also smiled with relief.

It was like a miracle.

The teacher stopped playing the harmonica and turned to the king and the queen.

"I've seen children like this. He will never learn to read complicated books or count money, and he will not be able to take proper care of the royal treasury. But he feels and understands music. And, more importantly, he knows how to make the people around him feel happiness. So, let him enjoy it. Don't hide him from the people anymore."

"I am scared," the king confessed. "People are expecting to be introduced to their future king."

“Your highness, you are a wise ruler. You will figure out exactly what to tell your people so they love your son just the way he is.”



The day of the ball arrived. The main city square was filled with people. A red carpet was laid out from the castle to the square. Greeted by the sounds of happy voices, the royal family stepped onto the stage. People lifted their little children onto their shoulders and kids waved tiny versions of the kingdom’s colorful little flags. The prince saw all the colorful little flags and

smiled. He let out a warm chuckle. People decided that one day this young boy would make a joyful and kind-hearted king.

When the cheering quieted a bit, the king addressed the crowd. “Allow me to introduce my son, who is turning twelve this very day. Once, a fortune teller told us that the queen and I were going to have the child we wanted so much, a child full of pure joy. And so he is, and his laughter is delightful. The kingdom will see no days of misery while we hear the sound of it. However, he won’t be able to rule our kingdom. Therefore, I have a favor to ask. Find me a child who likes to read complicated books, knows history and geography, and is excellent at calculations. It does not matter if they come from a rich or poor family. Find one like that and I will pass my throne to that child.”

People found themselves confused at hearing these words. But soon they decided that their ruler was right. The prince was very friendly during the ball. He mingled freely with the crowd, smiled at people, and hugged everyone who would stop to chat with him. Everyone could see how different he was from everybody else but were enchanted with his pure laugh. They said, “Isn’t it wonderful that a child of joy was born to our king?”



After a couple of days, a girl was invited to the castle. She correctly answered all of the questions given to her by the wise men, and as the king promised, was granted the title of the rightful heiress to the throne. While in the castle, the girl spent a lot of time in front of books, reading about things of such great seriousness that she would most probably have forgotten how to smile if it wasn't for the king's son. He would come to visit her in the library and would always cheer her up. When the girl grew into an adult, she inherited the throne and became the new queen.

The prince grew up, too. To be fair, no one referred to him as the future king anymore. Instead, everyone called him simply the Child of Joy. The Child of Joy was now a bit rounder and had a tiny bald spot on the top of his head, but the way he spoke and smiled were as if he was still a small boy. He would leave the castle quite often for hikes and loved to play the harmonica

he got from the village teacher. And those who met him along the way were thrilled. They would say it was a good sign and the day was going to be full of joy.

And it definitely always was.

Translated by *Laura Demoi*





THE THREE PRINCES' SEARCH FOR WISDOM



Once upon a time, there was a king and queen. They had three sons. When the sons were old enough, the king called them to him and said, “I am getting older and I can feel my strength fading. It’s time for me to send you out into the wide world so you can gather some wisdom. The one who returns the wisest will inherit my kingdom.”

Before the sons’ departure, the queen called all three of her sons to her and said, “I will give one magic token to each of you. They might come in handy on your journey. Just remember, the biggest gift and strongest token is your unity and brotherly love.”

And so the eldest son received a magic compass, the middle one got a magic flute, and the youngest one was given a magic needle.

After receiving their tokens and blessings, the three princes jumped on their horses and took off. They rode and rode until eventually they got to a crossroads. In the middle of it there was a huge stone with a carving. The carving said the following:

Turn left to be lost in the swamp

Continue straight to lose your horse

Turn right and everyone will turn away

The three princes jumped off their horses and sat down to talk over how they should proceed.

They did not like any of the possible directions. However, it was decided that they had to split up because if all three of them were to travel the same way, they would never know what was down the other two roads.

“I will take the left,” said the eldest. “I have the magic compass, after all. No swamp is a threat to me.”

“I’ll take the second road,” decided the middle son. “And to make sure I won’t lose my horse, I will give it to you, my youngest brother. I won’t give it to the eldest because it would be really difficult to handle two horses in the swamp.”

“In that case, I am left with the third road,” said the youngest. “I have the magic needle, and I guess people are always

in need of a tailor. And they will not sneer at someone that is needed.”

Having given their actions much thought, the brothers hugged goodbye and parted ways.



The eldest one turned left. Soon he reached the swamp. Thick, white mist crept over him and his horse as they entered. But the prince only glanced at his magic compass so he would know the way back and fearlessly went on. Suddenly, he heard a song coming from the mist. The voice was mesmerizing, and it called him to follow. The prince now found himself riding towards the voice. He stopped in a moment of clarity and climbed off the horse. He did not want the horse to accidentally step into quicksand and drown. He left the horse behind and proceeded towards the voice, checking his compass from time to time. He walked until he saw a tiny hut made out of old branches and a girl sitting next to it. It was her voice he followed. The girl heard someone coming and stopped singing.

“Who’s there?” she asked, looking in his direction.

The prince stopped in amusement. He was standing close enough for the girl to see him through the mist.

“It is I and my horse.”

“You have a pleasant voice,” the girl said. “Are you going to stay here for a bit?”

Only then did the prince realize that the girl was blind.

“What are you doing all alone here in the middle of the swamp?” he asked.

“I do not need much,” said the girl. “I sleep in this hut, and I pick cranberries and herbs. That’s perfectly enough for me.”

“Don’t you find it gloomy being here all alone without no one around?”

“Whenever I feel sad or lonely, I sing. And someone always comes to listen. You did, didn’t you? Perhaps you’ll stay for a bit? What do you say?”

“I can’t stay. My father is waiting for me back home.”

“Please, stay. You won’t be able to return anyway. This swamp is very tricky and deceiving. You won’t be able to find your way back. No one ever has.”



“I will. I have a magic compass. I could take you out of the swamp too. Of course, only if you want me to.”

“And what is there for a blind girl like me among people outside the swamp?” she asked.

“You have a very beautiful voice. It would be a pity for people not to be able to hear it. And you could live in my father’s castle. There’s enough room.”

After these words, the eldest king’s son took the girl by the hand, and carefully checking his magic compass, led her out of the swamp. Then they mounted his horse and took off to the castle as he now was suddenly sure he had gained enough wisdom.

The middle son took the road that led to the traveler losing their horse. He walked and walked and finally reached a tiny cottage with a high fence around it. The fence stakes were very sharp and had skulls mounted on them.

Oh, I see, so that’s how you lose your horse! the prince thought to himself.

And before he could react, an ugly creature covered in dirty, matted hair crept out of the cottage, opened the gate, grabbed the prince with its long, skinny hands and dragged him into its yard.

“I see you do not own a horse,” the creature said. “Too bad. I’ll have to fry and eat you instead. If only you had a horse, you could have given it to me and I would have let you go.”

“Well, if that’s what is meant for me, go ahead and fry me up,” said the prince. “I only have one final wish.”

“Well, if it’s nothing too complicated, sure, I can grant your last wish.”

“It is not complicated at all. I just want to play my flute one last time.”

“Oh, if that’s all it is, then go ahead and play.”

The prince took out his flute and started to play. The melody was so beautiful and touching that the creature felt tears rolling down its face, one after another. The creature sat down on the cottage stairs and smiled through its tears. And for some reason it did not look that ugly or scary anymore. Everyone’s a bit prettier when they smile, you see.

And, oh, the miracle! When the prince finished playing, instead of the ugly creature, there was a young witch sitting on the porch. She was in need of a wash and her hair needed brushing, but still, she was not that scary creature anymore.



“Thank you so much, good man,” she said. “Once in a moment of anger, I hit a little horse with a skinny stick. And the Horse King saw this. He punished me for my bad deed. He turned me into this ugly creature and I had to live here and take horses away from anyone who passed by. And now your music has somehow broken the curse.”

“It can’t be that the Horse King allowed you to fry horses and mount their heads on this fence.”



“No, these skulls are fake. They are here just to scare people. A traveler would ride closer, get really scared, and fall off

their horse. I'd catch the horse and drag it into the yard. By the time the traveler came to their senses, the horse would be gone and the traveler would run away in terror. And then I would set their horse free so it could join the herd of the Horse King."

"And what about me? Were you actually going to fry and eat me?" asked the prince.

"I'm not sure. I have never caught a human before. So I thought frying and eating someone would be exactly the thing an angry and ugly creature would do. What else is there to do in such a case?"

"But you are not an angry, ugly creature at all." he argued. "Whenever you smile, you have cute little dimples. And please don't eat me. Let's travel to my father's castle instead. You'll see how delighted he will be to see you."

They held hands and went back by the same road the prince arrived by. The king's middle son decided he had gained enough wisdom too.



And so he met the eldest brother at the very same crossroads they parted at some time ago. All four of them returned back home and were warmly greeted by the king and queen. The eldest son married the blind girl. Everyone came to listen to her singing. People decided that her voice was a true cure for the soul.

The middle son and the girl from the creepy Horse King cottage got married as well. It turned out she was a bit of a witch after all. She knew how to make an herbal potion that would stop someone from coughing and sneezing. It could cure the nastiest cold in one day, which is true magic, isn't it?

Only the youngest son was still away. He took the road that warned the traveler of becoming a laughingstock. He could not go very fast because he had his brother's horse in addition to his own.

Eventually, he reached a city. All its people had dark skin, so when they saw the stranger, they started to point at him.

"He is white... So white! Just look at his skin. Eww. That is disgusting."

The prince jumped off his horse and approached the person standing closest to him.

“Hello, may I kindly ask if by any chance a tailor is needed in your city?”

The man shook his head in fear and backed off. He was afraid of catching some sort of disease from this pale stranger.

What was there left to do for the king’s youngest son? He took both of his horses and went on. The prince wandered the city for a bit and eventually found a sign above a door. The sign read “Tailor’s.”

He knocked on the door.

A young man, about the same age as him, opened the door.

“Good day! I am looking for a job. You see, I’m a tailor,” the king’s son explained.

For a moment the young man stared at him, puzzled, and then looked up at the sign.

“Ah, that sign. It’s back from the day when my father was still around. It’s been a while since then. I wasn’t able to run the tailor’s shop properly and keep the business going.”

“Well, give me a chance and you’ll see. It will be up and running in no time. After all, two heads are always better than one.”
And so the prince settled himself in the young tailor’s house.



Both young men worked hard. At first, people grinned and sneered. Every time someone met the tailor's son in the city they'd ask, "How on Earth could you let this stranger in? Aren't you afraid of catching some sort of disease?" But the young tailor would always laugh it off. He'd come back to his house, make sewing patterns, and cut fabric, and the king's son would take them and make a few stitches with his magic needle. In no time, fine new clothes would be ready. Soon, the most curious people tried on these fancy clothes. And all were a perfect fit.

One morning, people found the tailor's shop closed. There was a note on the door that said, "Off to see the wide world."

In fact, they had gone to the castle to meet the prince's parents. The king and queen were thrilled to see their youngest son.

But the prince looked a bit sad. He told his mother, "I received a golden needle from you. I moved in with the best tailor I could find. Half of that city dresses in our clothes, but despite all of that, people there still sneer at me. Why is it so?"

"It's because not every person is wise in this world," his mother said. "But don't you worry. We'll think of something."

So the prince and the tailor remained at the castle. No one even noticed that the tailor had slightly darker skin than other people. And it did not bother anyone that both young men held hands and exchanged loving glances while they walked in the royal garden. So it was in this kingdom: everyone knew that heart wants what it wants and loves what it loves.



One year passed and the queen said to her youngest son, “I guess now is the right time for you to travel back to the tailor’s city. Before you go, let us send out doves with invitations to the royal ball. You’ll see what happens.”

After saying their goodbyes, the two young men got on their horses and rode away. The doves reached the city before they did. The moment the prince and the tailor arrived back to the city, all its windows and doors were flung open and people greeted them with joyful cheers and waves.

“It is so great you are finally back!”

“We have been waiting for you!”

When they reached the tailor’s shop, the most honored citizen of the city was already waiting for them at their door.

“Greetings! Welcome back!” He hugged them and shook their hands. “The beautiful clothes you have made are almost worn out after all this time. And we are in great need of new ones. You see, we have just received invitations to the royal ball at the castle of the neighboring kingdom! The king of the neighboring kingdom is having a celebration to honor his three sons. We need your help! No one else makes clothes like you do!”

So, both young men reopened the tailor shop and got down to work. They worked day and night, and eventually the people of the city again had brand-new, fancy clothes to flaunt. When the last piece of clothing was finished, the two young men locked the tailor shop once more and went back to the castle to return before all the guests from the city arrived.



The big day was finally here. Tables full of food and drink were laid out in the royal garden. The king had also invited the citizens of his own kingdom, but there was still plenty of room for everyone. Finally, the foreign guests arrived looking dashing in their new clothes.

“Welcome to our kingdom,” the king and queen said in greeting.

The guests looked around.

“Why, isn’t it strange?” a few whispered. “Everyone is so white here.”

“Please be seated,” the king said.

As soon as everyone sat down, the marshal made an announcement.

“The king’s eldest son and his wife!”

The eldest son entered the garden, carefully leading his beloved blind wife by the hand. She stopped in front of all of the guests and started to sing. She sang so beautifully that everyone felt enchanted. After the song was over, the first royal couple sat down at the table.

“The middle son of our king and his wife!” the marshal announced.

The middle son entered with a girl who had something truly bewitching about her.

They greeted the guests by saying, “We haven’t prepared a show, unfortunately. But if any of you ever falls ill and is in need of a magical remedy, we would be delighted to cure you.”

They joined the others at the table.

“The youngest son of our king and his husband!” the marshal finally announced.

The third king’s son stepped in with the young tailor. The foreign guests could not believe their eyes.

“It is our tailor and that stranger he took in to live with him!” the most honored citizen of the foreign city exclaimed.

“Indeed,” the king said. “He is my youngest son. Not only did he learn the trade of a tailor, but he also found love in your city. And all I sent him away for was to gain a bit of wisdom.”

“Well, if only someone would have told us who he really was, we would have greeted him properly and would have taken him to the most educated of our citizens,” said one of the foreign guests.

“I have no doubt that there are many well-educated people and a lot of smart books in your city, but knowledge and wisdom are not the same,” said the king. “To be wise is to respect and treat everyone equally, not only value their riches or titles.”

The guests exchanged glances. They remembered laughing at the stranger and disliking him only because of his skin color and that he was a bit different from them.

The king continued, “You see, we all have something unique about us. We are all different. And that is good. What would life be like if every single one of us could only sew or sing? I am so happy that each of my sons is different from the other.”

The guests felt even more embarrassed and started to apologize. But it was still odd for them to see two young men holding hands. The queen understood and smiled.

“And as for this, well, the heart wants what it wants. And when the heart speaks, we have to listen. Otherwise, there won’t be any peace or joy in life.”

“These are words of wisdom,” the guests agreed. “It is a great honor to be invited by such wise sovereigns. No wonder your kingdom thrives,” they added, looking at all the goods on the tables and all the smiling people gathered.

“We hope you visit our kingdom again very soon,” the king said.

“We’d be delighted. But first, we would like to invite you all to our city,” said the most honored citizen of the foreign city. “After all, you will definitely want to visit your youngest son. His home now is our city. Unless you wish to leave us without such wonderful tailors. During this past year we learned we truly need them.”

“We have enough great tailors in our kingdom.” the queen said. “If they wish to go back and continue dressing you, let it be so. And we will visit your city with great pleasure with our grandkids. One of the princesses is already expecting!”

After the celebration was over, the guests returned to their homes. The youngest son and the young tailor stayed for a couple of more weeks in the castle. It was just enough time for all of the foreign guests to return home and tell all their friends and neighbors that their own young tailor had found the love of his life and that it happened to be the son of a king. And that was a great honor because that king was very wise. The rest of the

people were convinced. After all, who were they to disagree with the most honored citizen of their city? People also realized that white skin was not contagious and that the only contagious thing the king's youngest son and the young tailor brought back with them on their return to the city was joy. From that day on, everyone was not only well dressed, but they also smiled more often.

Translated by Laura Demoi





THE PRINCESS, THE SHOEMAKER'S DAUGHTER, AND THE TWELVE BROTHERS



Once there was a king who had a daughter. When the princess grew up, princes from all over the world descended upon the castle to seek her hand in marriage. But the princess rejected them all. At night, she dreamed of someone with clear, bright eyes, but none of the men who came to the castle had such eyes. Therefore, all the young men who arrived were ordered by the princess to perform three tasks: to bake dark bread, to make shoes, and to sew a wedding dress. Unfortunately, none was able to do it. Some were able to bake the bread, some to make the shoes, but to the last, they failed the third task. But why? I cannot say. However, with each failure

the princess turned each suitor into a bird and they were released into the world to fly.

Near the royal castle lived a shoemaker's family. The shoemaker had twelve sons and one daughter. The sons learned about the princess's tasks and said that they were not so difficult. They had learned from their father to sew good shoes and baked bread daily on their own. Their mother had even taught them how to sew.

The oldest son went to the castle first. After a few days, a nightingale flew back to the shoemaker's home, perched in a bush, and began to sing. Everyone understood that this was the oldest brother, but the other brothers insisted they also try to accomplish the princess's tasks.

One by one, the brothers went to the castle, and after a few days, they flew home as nightingales. Not one of them had found success.

Then the youngest daughter went to the parents and said, "Now I will go to the palace."

The shoemaker did not want to let his last child go, but he couldn't dissuade her.

"My brothers went to the castle out of curiosity. But I have loved the princess for a long time. We used to play together in

the garden. If I do not perform the third task, she will recognize me and will not turn me into a bird. I will come back the same as I am now.”



So, the shoemaker’s daughter disguised herself in men’s clothing, hid her long hair in a hat, and went to the palace.

When the princess saw another young man, she sighed, took him to the kitchen and asked him to bake bread that night.

“It’s an easy task,” said the shoemaker’s daughter with a smile. She found everything she needed, so in the morning she was waiting for the princess with a fragrant loaf of bread.

“You have completed the first task,” said the princess. “And now you will have to make shoes for me without measuring my foot. Some of the young men managed to perform this task, but most of the shoes were either too small or too large for me. We’ll see how you succeed.”

“This is also a minor task,” said the shoemaker’s daughter in her disguise. “I learned to sew shoes from my father.”

She went to work. In the morning, she offered the princess a pair of beautiful leather shoes. The princess put on the shoes and was surprised—the shoes were neither too big nor too small, as if a tailor had measured her feet carefully.

“Well, one task remains, which none of the young men has managed to perform before you,” said the princess. She took the shoemaker’s daughter to another room, where she presented fine, white silk, scissors, and a needle. “You will have to sew me a wedding dress tonight. And this is the thread you will use.”

When the princess said this, she smiled cleverly and revealed a ball of yarn. This explained why the task couldn’t be performed even by the young men who could sew: this thick yarn could not go through the narrow eye of a needle.

The shoemaker’s daughter did not despair. She waited until the princess locked the door of room, carefully cut the fabric, and then took off her hat and let out her long blonde hair. She plucked out a single hair, easily put it through the eye of the needle, and made seams so fine they almost could not be seen. Then she hid her hair under the hat again, and in the morning an incomparable dress was waiting for the princess.



The princess tried on the garment. It fit like a glove.

The princess became upset. She did not want to marry the young man, but it wasn't fair to break her promise: he had performed all three tasks.

So, with the new shoes on her feet and dressed in the bridal dress, the princess was ready for the wedding.

The shoemaker's daughter, dressed as a young man, stood next to her.

She uttered an oath—to be together “until death do us part.” The princess said the same with a trembling voice.

After the king had uttered a blessing, he allowed the groom to kiss the bride. She was so unhappy that she did not even raise her eyes, and when she was kissed she closed them.

When their lips met, the hat of the shoemaker's daughter slipped off and everyone saw that next to the princess stood not a young man but a beautiful girl with long hair.

Everyone gasped in surprise.

The princess opened her eyes to see why they gasped. She saw standing there her childhood friend. She had dreamed of those bright, clear eyes.

The shoemaker's daughter hugged the princess and repeated the words of the oath, “Do you agree now to be with me until death do us apart?”

“I will love you a lifetime,” said princess with a relieved heart.

The king scratched his balding pate and accepted his daughter's decision. The horde of grooms had begun to bother him, anyway.

In addition, he was afraid that all the men of the kingdom would be turned into birds.



But after the first night, the shoemaker's daughter looked sad and pale. No wonder: as soon as the happy princess fell asleep with the shoemaker's daughter in her arms, a nightingale flew to the window, sat in the bush, and began to sing.

The shoemaker's daughter listened to the sad melody till morning and thought of her brothers.

The next night, two nightingales flew in and again prevented the shoemaker's daughter from going to sleep.

The shoemaker's daughter didn't want to say anything to the princess. She just shook her head sadly.

This pattern of events lasted for eleven nights. Each night, a new nightingale joined the singers. The princess did not wait

for them to arrive. Once the sun went down, the princess always fell into a deep sleep. She did not notice the shoemaker's daughter escaping from her embrace and going to the window to listen to the song of the nightingales. But in the morning, the shoemaker's daughter would always be sad.



The princess wanted to find out why the shoemaker's daughter felt sad every morning. On the twelfth night, the princess drew a knife across her palm so the pain would keep her awake. She closed her eyes and began to wait.

Soon, the nightingales began to sing. The shoemaker's daughter got out of bed and went to the window. The princess breathlessly got out of bed and as quietly as possible came close to her. But the nightingales heard anyway and scattered in fright.

"What have you done?" mourned the shoemaker's daughter. "Those were my brothers who came to sing for me, and you didn't let them finish their song. They are afraid of you because you turned them into the nightingales. And they will never come back!"



“I did not know how else to avoid marriage. If I had left any of them as a man, he would be able to tell others why they failed to sew a dress. Someone would have certainly brought with them the proper thread. But do not grieve. I will find your brothers and release them from their enchantment.”

“I will go with you. It will be easier with two of us. In addition, they will not be afraid of me.”



In the morning, they baked some bread, jumped on their horses, and rode off in search of the brothers.

They roamed for many days and nights, but no one could tell them where the twelve nightingales made their roost. They were almost out of food, and they met fewer and fewer people. Finally, they rode to the wood, and on the edge of the wood

there was a hut. They were already quite tired, so they decided to see if they could stay there overnight.

A shrunken little old woman opened the door. “If you have anything to eat, then I’ll let you spend the night,” she said. “I haven’t had a bite of food in days.”

The princess put her hand into the bag and pulled out a handful of crumbs. That’s all that they had left.

“This morning, we ate the last loaf of bread,” she said. “But you have been starving, so you need food more than we do.”

“Thank you for your good heart, girls,” said the old woman. “Come inside.”

Inside, she sprinkled the crumbs in a bowl and poured each a glass of water. Then she pushed the bowl into the middle of the table.

“Take some. It will be enough for all of us,” she encouraged.

And it was true. No matter how many handfuls of bread-crumbs they took, the bowl remained full.

“Maybe you have seen twelve brothers singing as nightingales somewhere?” asked the shoemaker’s daughter.

“Yes, I have,” said the old woman. “And I even know that the princess turned them into birds. But as they say, a bird you set free may be caught again, but uttered words can never return. It will not be easy to remove the spell.”

“I will do anything for my beloved to regain her lost brothers!” cried the princess.

“Then listen. You will reach another kingdom soon. The king there caught your nightingales, closed them in golden cages, and makes them sing for him alone. Ask to serve in his castle. Then gather one feather of each nightingale and burn them in a bonfire—it must be in a bonfire! Only in this way will the birds turn into humans again. But beware—if someone sees you holding hands, embracing, or kissing, you will not escape alive. People there do not know what love is.”

After they thanked the old lady for this information, they jumped on their horses and went to look for the kingdom.





Soon they arrived at the palace in the city. The princess was employed there as a gardener and shoemaker's daughter as a cook.

The city was strange. The residents smiled constantly, but their smiles were artificial, as if glued onto their faces. People pretended to be friendly and greeted each other, but when they turned away, they became surly again. But inanimate objects showed hate openly. Travelers who visited often tripped over a stone that had intentionally rolled under their feet. Or if they stumbled over a fence, they always tore their clothes.



Needless to say, the princess's arms were nicked quickly by rose thorns, and the shoemaker's daughter kept scalding her hands when removing a pot from the heat.

However, they still worked patiently and waited until they collected the feathers of the twelve nightingales. This task wasn't very difficult because the king wanted fresh-cut flowers to always brighten the room where the cages with the nightingales hung.

Over the course of twelve days, the princess collected all the feathers.

She was excited to tell the shoemaker's daughter. When they met in the rose garden, they hid behind a bush and embraced. They missed each other so much, they forgot all the old woman's warnings.

Suddenly, the rosebush parted and the king appeared in front of them.

"What do I see?" he shouted. "So, my gardener kisses my cook! You have violated the laws of this country. It is forbidden to love here. Is it not clear that families are meant only for continuation of kin and to have somebody inherit their wealth?

For this crime, you will be publicly burned at the stake to set an example for others.”



A large bonfire was prepared in the town square. The shoemaker’s daughter and the princess were taken to it and tied up. The wood was ignited. The princess pulled the nightingale feathers out of her pocket and threw them into the fire.

And—a miracle! The wind rose, put out the fire, smashed the windows of the castle, opened the doors of the golden cages,

and released the twelve nightingales. They flew into the square, landed on the ground and here, in front of the citizens of the town, turned into twelve handsome young men. They surrounded the shoemaker's daughter and said, "This is our youngest sister. We will not allow you to hurt her."



And then they turned to the princess. "You see what happens when you do not reveal your wishes. If you had confessed to the king right away that you loved our sister, then there would be no need for us to sing as nightingales for such a long time, and you wouldn't have encountered such danger."

"In my kingdom nobody is allowed to love!" howled the king. Because of his howling, the wind rose again, caught him in a whirl, and blew him away.

The townspeople looked at each other.

“What do we do now without a king? Who will issue orders and make laws?” they wondered.

“You will issue laws,” the princess said. “There are countries which are ruled by kings, for example, my homeland. But in other countries people live without any ruler. It will not be easy, but you will learn.

“But we don’t know where to begin!”

“Start from the most basic law, that all are equal despite their differences. Everybody should have the same rights: to work, to rest, to get an education. And children also have the right to play.”



The townspeople gradually issued new laws. They began to have happy and beautiful lives. Even the inanimate objects of the town were no longer angry. Fences did not tear clothing, and rocks did not roll under anyone’s feet intentionally. True,

the roses did not lose their thorns, but everyone knew that such was their nature. Therefore, instead of picking them, people admired them from afar.

The princess and the shoemaker's daughter returned to their kingdom to listen to the songs of real nightingales. The brothers, after all, had been freed.

Translated by *Virginija Jakutyte-Symanska*





THE AMBER HEART



On the seashore, next to a tall dune, stood a tiny cottage. A large family lived inside the tiny cottage: a father, a mother, seven sisters, and a baby brother. Every morning, the mother and father would sail out to fish. Sometimes the older sisters would join them and the younger sisters would stay at home to look after their baby brother. Every night, they would all gather around the dinner table and talk about their day. Life passed peacefully for some time.

But after a while, a change began to occur. You could read the growing worry on the parents' faces.

“People are hardly buying any of our fish anymore. The town market is filled with cheaper fish from other countries. There are tons and tons of fish out there in the foreign seas.”

“It seems we may have to go somewhere else to earn enough to survive.” As they spoke, they nodded their weary heads.

One night, the parents sat at the table and the father said, “We haven’t sold even a single fish today. That is why we would like to discuss something with you, children. Would you let us go abroad so we can provide for your needs? Your uncle lives there. He promised to find a place for us at a fish factory. While one of us could stay here with you, your mother and I would hate to spend so much time without seeing each other.” The children’s father hugged their mother and looked at her lovingly.

The daughters traded glances. They were almost adults and could have travelled with their parents if they had wanted to do so. But they liked living in their cottage by the sea. Besides, all their friends lived in town. The daughters did not want to leave.

“Go, travel. We will be fine.”

“We can go fishing on our own. Who knows? Maybe our fish will be needed again.”

“Anyway, someone has to stay and take care of our home.”

“And look after our baby brother.”

The girls talked excitedly amongst themselves. Meanwhile, their baby brother hugged his father’s leg. He did not want his parents to leave. His eyes filled up with tears and his lower lip trembled.

“There, don’t hold your tears in,” said the father gently. “Me, I would feel sad too if I were so little and had to be away from my mother and father.”

The boy sniffled. “It would still be sad even if I was big.”

“It would. And it is. That is why we are going to leave you this,” said the children’s mother. She handed the little boy a tiny heart made out of amber. “Anytime you put it in the palm of your hand and stroke it gently, we will feel you thinking about us.”

The following morning, the parents packed their bags and travelled away.



The days passed. The mother and father began to work in the fish factory, and every month they sent money to their children. The sisters bought bread and cheese and meat so that the table was always full. Sometimes they would also receive a letter, which one of the sisters would read out loud over dinner. And the baby brother would put the amber heart in the palm of his hand and stroke it gently. The amber heart wasn't very big. It fit into the small pocket of his shirt just fine, so he had it with him at all times.

The little boy liked to go for long walks on the seashore all alone. It would be just him, the amber heart in his pocket, and the sea. And every time, he would stroll further and further from his cottage. He walked so far that even the roof of the cottage would disappear behind the tall dune.

One time, he heard steps behind him.

“Who's there?” an unpleasant voice asked.



“Oh, it’s the little snot-nose,” another annoying voice answered.

“Sure is a tiny one. As light as a feather,” the boy heard a snigger and felt the sand slipping from beneath his feet. Someone picked him up and dumped him in the sand.

“Help me! Hellllp! Sisters!!!” he cried.

“Oh shoot. He’s not alone! Let’s get out of here,” the voices shouted.

Suddenly, all was quiet again. The boy laid on the sand, too afraid to move a muscle, until one of his sisters came looking for him and found him. She lifted him and took him in her arms. She brushed the sand off his clothes. Everything seemed in place—but the amber heart was gone.

The little boy stopped talking. No matter how hard all of the sisters tried to make him talk, nothing seemed to work. The boy also refused to go to the seaside unless one of his sisters came along.

They say that bad things come in threes. Days went by and there was not a single letter from their parents. The sisters, worried, continued to write to them. But they received no response.

“That heart must have been magical,” the sisters whispered. “It must have contained all of our parents’ love for us. Maybe they forgot about us. Or maybe something worse happened. What if they are in great trouble? We must ask around the town. Maybe someone can help us find the amber heart.”

And so they did. But no one had heard a thing about the amber heart. Only the shopkeeper’s son grinned wickedly. He had had his eye on the eldest sister for a while and hoped to use this unfortunate event to marry her, even though he knew the girl fancied another.

“I hear you are looking for the amber heart. Is that true?” he asked.

“It is,” the eldest sister answered.

“Promise you’ll marry me and I will tell you where you can find it,” he said with a wink.



“That heart belonged to my parents. And they married for love. How can I marry you for a favor? I cannot do that, even if it would bring the amber heart back. That would not be right.”

“Well, they married out of love, and you would marry out of gratitude. That is still the right thing to do,” the shopkeeper’s son said.

What else was there left to do? The eldest sister said yes. The shopkeeper’s son took the amber heart from his pocket and gave it to her.



“And just so you know, breaking a promise is not the right thing to do. You can write your parents that the wedding will be in three months.”

The eldest sister returned home and, without saying a word, gave the amber heart to her baby brother. She went to her room and closed the door. The other sisters tried to ask her what had happened, but the eldest could only cry. And as for the amber heart, no matter how gently the boy stroked it, it no longer felt warm. Its color had darkened so much it was almost black.



Meanwhile, far, far away, the parents were worried. They had never stopped writing to their children. But they hadn't received letters in return, as if their children had completely forgotten about them.

“I can feel it with all my heart that something bad has happened,” the mother said.

“Let’s go back home, shall we?” the father said.

They packed their things once more, this time for the journey back home.



Meanwhile, the residents of the seaside town were getting ready for the wedding. The eldest sister dressed herself in white. The shopkeeper’s son put on a fancy suit and pinned a flower to the lapel of his jacket. Relatives, friends, and a great many townspeople came to the wedding. It was not a very big town, you see, so almost everyone was there. Some people found it very peculiar that the parents of the bride were not attending the wedding. People whispered they must have died since no one had heard from them for a while. The sisters were sitting and wiping away their tears. And just when the bride and groom began to walk towards the altar to start the ceremony, the church doors opened and the long-absent parents appeared.

“Mommy! Daddy!” Their son leaped into their arms. And at that moment, the amber heart fell out of his tiny hands and shattered onto the church floor into thousands of pieces.

People stared in astonishment, first at the floor and then at the parents._

“It’s alright, my baby boy,” the mother said. “No matter that the amber heart has broken into so many pieces. We can now share it with everyone. It is just like love. It cannot be stolen—it can only be shared.”

“Our dearest daughter,” she continued. “How wonderful it is that we made it back on time. You might have gotten married without our blessing.”

“But I do not want to get married!” said the eldest daughter.

The shopkeeper’s son hung his head. “Forgive me. I only thought that giving back the amber heart would earn me your daughter’s gratitude.”



“And where did you get the amber heart from in the first place?” the father asked.

The shopkeeper’s son’s face turned red. He could have said he found it in the sand, but it would not be the truth. He actually took it when it fell out of the little boy’s pocket. He was in fact one of the bullies who attacked the little boy.

“The amber heart only helps those whose hearts are already made out of amber. Your heart must be made out of a different kind of stone, I guess,” the mother said.



After a little while, people decided to carry on with their business and left, and so the family returned to their tiny cottage on the seaside. They were happy to be all together again even though they knew that soon it would be time to part ways once more. Just like the amber heart shattered into pieces, they knew they would soon have to split apart and make their way

into the big, wide world, each in search of their own happiness. They would separate and gather back together on this seaside—almost like the tiny bits of amber people still find to this day on the shores of the Baltic sea and whose discoverers make up stories, just like the one you have just read.

Translated by *Laura Demoi*





Neringa Dangvyde Macate is a specialist in children's literature, has authored a number of literary articles and reviews, participates in major literature and culture conferences, and is a member of a National Book Evaluation Committee of Lithuania. She is a member of the Lithuanian Writers Union and the author of two children's books, Gintarinė širdis (The Amber Heart, 2013) and Vaikas su žvaigžde kaktoje (The Child With a Star on His Forehead, 2016).

The fairy-tale collection *The Amber Heart* was published in 2013. Its publication was funded by the Lithuanian University of Education in collaboration with the Lithuanian Council for Culture.

However, shortly after the publication of *The Amber Heart*, a few members of the Lithuanian parliament reached out to the Lithuanian University of Education to express their concern regarding the content and subjects of the book. The claim was forwarded to the Office of the Inspector of Journalistic Ethics. In 2014, a public statement was issued declaring “The Three Princes’

Search for Wisdom” and “The Princess, the Shoemaker’s Daughter, and the Twelve Brothers” to be potentially harmful for individuals under 14 years old. These claims were based on the fact that these two stories talked about same-sex couples who got married and lived happily ever after. According to the current Lithuanian Law of Minor Protection, any information that speaks about or encourages any form of family different from that indicated in the Lithuanian Constitution is considered to be “harmful.”

Following this statement, the Lithuanian University of Education publicly changed its opinion on the book, declaring *The Amber Heart* to be “annotated propaganda for homosexuality” and terminated its distribution and sales. The author sued the Lithuanian University of Education for its actions. The decision of the court was that the Lithuanian University of Education must lift the sales and distribution ban, however, with one condition. The condition was that from then on, all copies of *The Amber Heart* could only be distributed and sold with a parental advisory sticker stating that the book is potentially harmful for anyone under 14 years of age.

The author does not agree with this decision and is still fighting for *The Amber Heart* to be sold as any other children’s book. Notably, this is the only case in Lithuanian literature where a book was banned, completely removed from sale, and then returned with a restriction upon it. With help from various local human rights organizations, the second edition of *The Amber Heart* was

published in 2015, but the trial process and dispute over the first edition of *The Amber Heart* continues.

In May 2019 the author of *The Amber Heart* lost her case, based on the final decision effectively presented by the Supreme Court of Lithuania. The final decision of the Supreme Court cannot be overturned. Therefore, the only way for the author to seek justice and continue to see the book published is to forward the case to the European Court of Human Rights.

