

"A Flowering Tree"

A Kannada Folktale, translated and retold by A. K. Ramanujan
(retold again by Eric Miller)

Once there was a girl who could turn into a tree.

She would have her younger sister pour a pot of water over her, and she would turn into a tree. Her younger sister would gently pick the flowers that would grow from the branches of the tree. She was very careful to not break any of the branches. Then, to turn her older sister back into a human, she would pour another pot of water over her.

The sisters did this a number of times. They would take the flowers to the market, and sell them. With the money, they would buy vegetables. They would bring these vegetables home for their mother to cook. Their family was very poor.

After some days, the mother said to her daughters, "I appreciate you bringing the vegetables, but where are you getting the money for this? Are you stealing the money?"

The older daughter replied, "Mother, I am afraid to tell you how we are getting the money, because I am afraid you might not believe me."

The mother said, "Please just tell me."

The older daughter said, "Well, I can turn into a tree, and when I do, flowers grow from my branches."

The mother said, "Stop telling lies!"

The older daughter said, "Come out to the yard, and I will show you."

So they went outside. Water was poured over the older sister, and indeed she turned into a flowering tree. The mother was amazed!

So everyday the girls would go to the market to sell the flowers. The family began to get a little extra money, enough to have their house re-painted. Some of their neighbours started to ask, "Where are these people getting all of this money?"

Nearby, there was a prince who lived in a palace. Even he heard about this family that had suddenly become wealthy. He came to investigate. He hid behind a tree, and saw the older sister turn into a tree, and the younger sister pick the flowers.

The prince went back to the palace, and said to the king, "Father, I have found the girl I want to marry. She lives in a nearby village."

The king said, "My son, you can't marry such a girl. You are royalty, and she is a commoner."

But the prince said, "Father, my mind is made up. I want to marry that girl. She has wonderful abilities."

So the wedding occurred. That night, when the prince and his new wife tried to go to sleep, they found their mattress was very hard. So the prince said, "My wife, why don't you become a tree, and I will pick your flowers, and we can sleep on the flowers."

They did what he suggested. In the morning they threw the flowers out the window. They did this same thing for a number of days, and eventually a huge pile of flowers developed outside their window.

The prince had two sisters -- one younger than him (she was not even ten years old), and one older than him. His younger sister asked him, "Brother, why are there so many flowers outside your window?"

The prince told her. And she asked him, "Could you have your wife come down to the garden where I play with my friends, and have her show us how she can turn into a tree and make flowers?"

The prince asked his wife to do this. The wife was afraid to turn into a tree in public, but she finally agreed.

When the wife turned into a tree in the garden, the young children started fighting over the flowers that grew from her branches. The children struggled and grabbed and fought, and many of the trees branches were broken. Just then, it began to rain, and all of the children went running home.

The rainwater turned the wife back into a human, but because of the damage that had been done to her branches, she was missing both her arms and both her legs. So she fell onto the ground. She tried to roll home, but in the rain she rolled into a ditch, and from there she could not help but roll part way down the side of a mountain.

That night, the prince asked his younger sister, "Where's my wife?"

The younger sister answered, "I don't know. When it started raining, we all came home."

But the wife did not come home that night. She did not come home the next day, or the next. They searched for her, but they could not find her. Her husband became very sad. He stopped brushing his teeth. He stopped combing his hair. He stopped washing. He stopped shaving. He stopped cutting his hair and fingernails. He came to look like a wild animal. Finally, he just wandered off into the forest.

After some time, his wife managed to roll back up the mountainside. Then she rolled to the home of her husband's older sister. This older sister looked out her window and saw the living lump of flesh laying on the side of the road. She saw it was a woman, and she thought, "That woman looks familiar. Could she be my younger brother's wife?"

So the prince's older sister had her husband's wife brought into the house, and bathed. The wife was put in new clothes, placed in a bed, and given food and drink. But the wife was very weak: she could not even speak.

After some days, the prince also appeared outside his older sister's house. Again, the older sister looked out her window and saw a person down there, and thought, "This person looks familiar." She could not see his face, because his hair was covering it. But she looked and looked, and thought, "Could this person be my younger brother?"

She had the man brought into the house. He could not speak, but when his hair was parted, she saw that this indeed was her younger brother. She had him bathed, clothed, and fed. Then he was brought into the room in which his wife lay in bed. Neither of them could speak, but when they saw each other, each of them smiled.

After two days, the wife regained her ability to speak. She said, "Dear husband, please pour water on me. I will become a tree again. While I am a tree, please fix my broken branches as best you can. Then pour water on me again."

The prince did this. You know, when branches have been broken, they can not be un-broken. But they can be straightened and neatened. The prince did what he could. After he poured water on her to make her become human again, he was delighted to see that when she regained her human form, she once again had both her arms, and both her legs.

Now husband and wife were strong enough to speak once more, and they told each other how happy they were to be together again. And they lived happily ever after.