**Three Eggs**

Once upon a time there lived a prince and he loved to read. He read in one of the books that in a kingdom nine kingdoms away there was a forest, and hidden under dry leaves there were three eggs, and in every egg there was a girl.

And off he went looking for them.

He rode on his horse and travelled for a whole month. And he came to a forest, up in the mountain, and met an old woman there:

- Bless thee, Grandmother, God save thee, Grandmother!

And she answered so:

- God bless you, my son, had you not used God’s name to greet me, I should have torn you to pieces. But, tell me, what are you looking for?

The prince told her everything.

- In the next kingdom lives my brother, his hair as white as a tree stump covered with snow – said the old woman – but do not fear him, just tell him where you are travelling and what you are looking for.

So he went on and found the white-haired old man. The prince swore allegiance to the old man, and then the old man showed him the mountain where the three eggs were hidden.

And the prince went to that mountain. He pulled apart the pile of dry leaves beneath an oak tree. He found an egg. He rummaged through the leaves some more, and found all three eggs.

He went back to the old man. The old man warned him not to break any of the eggs before he was near water. Then the prince got up on his horse and rode off.

But on the way the prince began to worry. What if the book lied that there were girls inside the eggs? There might not be any girls in there. So he stopped his horse and broke one egg. Lo and behold, out of the egg came a girl, so beautiful that there were none more beautiful in nine kingdoms.

- Give me some water – the girl asked.

- There is no water – said the prince.

And so the girl died. Then the prince broke another egg, just to be sure, and out of the egg came an even more beautiful girl. And she, too, asked for water, but there was no water. And so she, too, died.

At last the prince arrived at a well. He broke the third egg, and out of the egg came the most beautiful girl. She said: Give me some water! So the young man poured water on her.

And she lived. The two of them got on a horse, but the girl was naked. They came near a town, and the prince thought: How can I take her to the town naked? They stopped under an oak tree and he said to her:

- Go on, climb onto this oak tree, and I’ll go get some clothes in the town.

And he left her there in the oak tree.

Shortly afterwards, a royal serving maid came to the well under the oak tree. And she saw a beautiful girl in the water.

- Am I that beautiful? – the serving maid wondered.

- It is not you, it is I – she heard from the oak tree above.

The serving maid looked up and saw a naked woman. She asked her to come down and talk with her a little. And when the woman got down, the serving maid said:

- Why don’t I look for lice in your hair?

But as soon as the girl put her head in the serving maid’s lap, she stabbed her with a needle. For she was a witch. Instantly, the beautiful girl was changed into an oak tree. And the serving girl climbed up onto the first oak tree and took off her clothes.

Presently, the prince returned from the town. He brought a dress, and he wondered very much how the girl was not so beautiful as before. But what could be done? She got dressed and they set out for the royal castle.

They had been living together for about a month. Then his wife pretended to be ill.

- I dreamt last night – said she to her husband – that I would get well if you should have that oak tree cut down and made into a bed for us.

As they were cutting the oak tree down, a splinter flew and fell onto the doorstep of some poor old woman called Kate, who lived in a shack close by. And from that day, every morning Kate found the dishes, that she’d left dirty the night before, washed up.

Kate wanted to see who it was, who washed all her dishes overnight. She took her wedding towel and got into bed. She covered herself with the towel, but did not go to sleep, and then, at midnight, she saw a naked girl washing the dishes and moving about the house. Kate threw the towel around the girl’s neck. And the girl spoke so to the old woman:

- What did you do? I might have served you for as long as you lived. Now I must stay visible.

Old woman Kate said kindly:

- Daughter, sit with me and tell me what has happened to you.

She told her heart-breaking story to Kate.

The prince was collecting tales from his kingdom, he listened to the stories the people were telling, and so he called on the old woman Kate to tell the stories she knew:

- Come on, Grandmother Kate, you are an old woman and you know so many lovely tales. Tell us a tale!

- Indeed, I have a lovely tale to tell – said the old woman Kate – but it will not be so lovely to some.

- Never you mind, Grandmother Kate, go on, tell your tale! – said the prince, but his wife felt that there would be trouble:

- Haven’t we heard enough of these old women’s tales?

- Grandmother Kate, do tell your tale!

And so, the old woman began telling the tale of a prince who lived once upon a time. He read books and learned from one that there were three eggs with beautiful girls inside. And he left one of the girls up in an oak tree. And while he was in the town to get a dress for the girl, a serving maid turned the girl into an oak tree, and took her place.

Kate span her yarn, and then the prince’s wife jumped up:

- Enough! My head aches from all these folk tales!

- Keep telling you tale, Grandmother Kate, and you, wife, go lie down and sleep it off!

And the old woman told her tale to the end. How they’d cut down the girl-oak tree, and how a chip from the tree had fallen on her doorstep, and how at night the chip would become a beautiful girl, until one night she’d thrown a towel around her neck.

She led the prince to her house. And she put her arms around a beautiful girl. She was still naked. They took her to the castle and dressed her in a golden gown.

The prince asked the serving maid:

- How shall I execute you?

- Put me in a barrel and nail the barrel shut, then have me carried atop the highest hill and rolled down into the sea!

And so the witch rolled down in a barrel into the sea and was drowned, and the prince married the beautiful girl from the egg.

*Banija (central southern region of Croatia, near Bosnian border)*