



Letter to a Young Writer

LEE UPTON

You know this story well: The story of the poor miller's daughter with a braggart for a father. The father claims his daughter can spin straw into gold. He tells the king this story, and at once the king locks the miller's daughter into a room piled high with straw, demanding she spin the straw into gold or die.

While the poor miller's daughter weeps, a strange little man appears before her. He promises to spin straw into gold for the weeping girl—for a price. First, her necklace. You remember what happens next: the king, unsatisfied, demands more gold and locks the poor miller's daughter into a bigger room filled with even more straw. But just in time the little man appears again and saves the girl by spinning straw into gold. As payment, he extracts from the poor miller's daughter a ring. Finally, when the king demands even more gold, the miller's daughter promises the odd little man her unborn child. After all, she cannot be sure of what the future holds; she only knows she will die if more straw isn't spun into gold. At last, the greedy king marries the poor miller's daughter, for who could be richer than a king with a wife who can spin gold from straw?

When the miller's daughter, now a queen, gives birth, the little man returns to claim the child. The miller's daughter weeps and weeps. She offers to give the little man anything in the world but her child. The little man squeezes one pitiful drop of pity from his grizzled heart and tells her she may keep her child if, within three days, she guesses his name. Luckily for our queen, a messenger she has sent far and wide overhears the strange little man at the edge of the forest. The little man was stomping his feet and singing a rhyme that gave away his name. When the little man returns to the queen, certain he'll take her child, she asks him if his name is Dick. Or is it Tom? Or is it Harry? At last she pronounces the strange little man's real name: Rumpelstiltskin.

In fury, Rumpelstiltskin slams his foot into the ground up to his waist and tears himself in two.¹

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Where do we begin? The tale has so much to tell us about the writer's life. What are its lessons? First: Do not allow family members to brag indiscriminately about your talents. Second: Avoid the greedy at all costs and certainly do not marry them. Third: Do not make promises that cause you to abandon your talent or your children.

And what is the lesson for Rumpelstiltskin? Do not tear yourself in two after a night when you've given a particularly bad poetry reading.

But there is, of course, much more, for this is a story that itself longs for transformation after transformation.² Who is the miller's daughter, after all? She is a figure for the writer. The writer left alone in a room and bent on transformation. Her life, she thinks, is straw. Straw up to the walls, abundant and cheap, all those words she has heard and spoken and read, all her instincts, all that life she has led. Someone powerful wants something more from her. He's sure of what he wants. He knows precious metal when he sees it.

And then the door is closed, and the king locks himself inside the writer. The king thinks he knows what a poem looks like—that it should shine and bring power and profit. He knows this. And he knows a great deal about locking doors.

But no amount of gold is enough for him. He forces the poor miller's daughter into larger and larger rooms filled with straw. Marrying her, he puts her in the largest room of all, the room of marriage where he may keep her always—where he demands only gold. A metal of perfection. And perfectionism gives the miller's daughter bigger and bigger rooms but does not let her grow.

Her soul shrivels as the gold of the recognizable poem rises. This is what the king wants, isn't it? She is a writer, after all. Why can't she fulfill his ambitions and force her poems to become hard golden currency?

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But when the poor miller's daughter looks at the words around her, everything seems like straw. Straw only. Brittle, detestable straw.

Dear writer, when you are alone and ill at heart, questioning your worth, gnawing on your hands and heart, a little man will come. He will stamp his feet. And there are so many ways you can approach him.

Despite the shriveled, mangy figure of a man he makes, he's actually a better man than the king. The king has no pity. The king prefers the dead. The king wants to make you his drone, spinning and spinning onto your spool the perfectly golden poem for the perfectly golden anthology.

At least the little man (let's call him a troll, for no one knows for sure what he is)—this troll of a man has energy and wit, no matter how malevolent his wit. And he'll give you a chance: three days. Besides which, he has saved your life

The straw of quirks and earnest mistakes, of stubbornness: these are your living gold.

three times already. You would think that with his talent for making gold the troll wouldn't need anything. But then he has a more discerning mind than the king: the little man wants what only you can give him, this potential, this living poem of the future. And he has what you'll need if you want your poem to belong to you: a word that demands a guess.

Poor miller's daughter with a king in your head, a ruler who wants everything, who is never satisfied. Once you get those poems published, where's the book? And now where's the prize? And what of your responsibilities? Aren't you one of us? You're not one of them, are you? You won't make mistakes, will you?

Poor miller's daughter—now, along with the king, there is also this little troll-like man kicking around in your head.

What are you to do when confronted by such a wizened man, squat as an old stump and capable of such rage he can tear himself in two?

Dear poet, you could say to him: I don't know where you came from, but I like your nighttime rituals, all that dancing and chanting. By the way, what should I call you?

He doesn't want you to give him the right word this minute. He'll give you some time. And you'll oblige him. You'll use the wrong word again and again, and he'll listen, smugly, but he'll listen. He knows full well that everything depends on your stumbling toward the right word—and it's not the word you're prone to think it is. His name isn't, he would admit, golden. His name sounds like skinny shanks and shredded bedding. He hops, he bellows, he dances, while you search for the word. Even if the word sounds odd and silly, it will be more precious than precious metal.

You don't necessarily have to dance with him to discover the word. You don't necessarily have to kiss him. But you do have to listen to him.

And think of this: even if you are royalty now, you will never stop being a poor miller's daughter. You will always have a word to seek.

And you should know this: your father was right, despite his bragging that got you into all this trouble in the first place. He was telling the truth. You have a talent.

In every miller's daughter's life and in the life of any writer milling words, a king and a troll stand up and make their claims. And every time you enter the room where you spin your straw they stand up again. You must make the king, blinded by vanity and greed, stand aside. And you must follow the troll and whisper names into his ear and hope to hear in return each strangely needed word.

If you are lucky and determined, for many years you will come back again and again to a room with its mounds and mounds of straw, and you will come to love straw, its subtle golden glow, its usefulness. It's your straw, after all, and you're from a family of millers. How various is straw, how beautiful its imperfections. The straw of quirks and earnest mistakes, of stubbornness: these are your living gold.

And as for Rumpelstiltskin, so what if upon relinquishing his one right word he will vanish, tearing himself in two? He'll come back again and again, dancing and stamping his foot into the earth, almost up to his heart. It pays to be grateful to him. He knows more about straw and gold than anyone but you.

1. The version of the tale that I have consulted is *Grimms' Tales for Young and Old: The Complete Stories*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Doubleday, 1977). 2. Some more transformations for you: In "Rumpelstiltskin," Anne Sexton makes the troll a "Doppelgänger." And in "The Dwarf Inside Us: A Reading of 'Rumpelstiltskin,'" Roni Natov argues that "Rumpelstiltskin himself represents the artist" and that