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The Diamond Face

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The Diamond Face

In the 1700's, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu introduced into England a practice called 'variolation', which she had observed in Turkey while her husband was on embassy there. It involved infecting a healthy person with smallpox. The infected person was then isolated until they recovered from the milder form of the illness produced: this protected others and themselves from uncontrolled exposure to the disease during that period. Once recovered, they were immune. Lady Mary's children received this procedure. As the practice caught on in England, people began to hold 'variolation parties' in which they were isolated together. Though some aspects of this story are loosely modeled on these events, the story is not meant to be strictly historical in any of its details. It takes place in the realm of fairy tale.

Characters in the story:
the king
Arturo, the king's friend
the king's mother
Ava, a lady in waiting
a princess
a child

The Diamond Face

by October Williams

for Holly

Leaves flew around him — amber and emerald, ruby, russet. Fugitive jewels turned around him; and he turned. There was something in them: a pattern — a face — a voice. The colors changed to wings. As if an archer drew them on a single string, they flew away, circled, and returned. They

settled in the treetops — common brown birds like a crown of thorns in the bare branches — and they sang. It was a song he recognized, but could not remember. They spread their wings, and their feathers turned to light. The trees were wearing a tracery of light like a prismatic shawl. There were so

many chandeliers in the forest: the colors of the sky deepened above them, and the branches held the colors in their light. And then the prisms began to fall. It was raining. His head was bare, and his eyelashes and lips and nose began to drip with rain; rain traced down his jaw like tears. He was empty, and cold, and hungry — so hungry with all the years of his ageless wandering. The rain blew around him like a veil blowing over a face: he could almost see the face through the silver blowing, beautiful with diamonds. He hesitated, and reached out his fingers . . .

He blinked. Light splintered along his lashes. He propped himself up and rubbed a sluggish hand over his face. He yawned, and looked around.

There was a coil of dogs on the rug, before a fire grate; bedcovers trailing over the floor. A shaft of light groped over the stone windowsill, over the dogs and the bedclothes: he sat up into it and rubbed his eyes. And then his pulse faltered — he remembered. What? The dew on the stone sill blinked — a swift sparkle like the edge of a sword flash — when he did. Oh, what? — a pattern he had always known and accepted; the invisible ink of some other consciousness suddenly revealed in his own. A face in the light. He groped over the blankets.

The light shifted upwards and the dew stood still. The room in the cold bath of morning was empty. His fingers closed over nothing.

The diamond face had only been a dream.

##

There was an outbreak of plague that year. The countries surrounding his kingdom were rife with what had been nicknamed “White death”, for its pale pox. One of his first acts on becoming king had been to

establish quarantines at the borders; but his friend Arturo returned that day from the provinces with news that plague had crossed the Northern border — near the orphanage funded by crown lands.

It was also the year of his mother’s efforts to negotiate a marriage for him: she had invited a princess. “You’re so concerned about all these present needs, dear, but what about the need for an heir? It’s so terribly short-sighted to let one need after another crowd out the future of the entire kingdom. And the people like pageantry immensely. Their world is beggared for lack of it — life is so little worth without the sort of thing we represent. The people want to see us dancing . . .”

“The people may go blind,” Arturo interjected.

“Pardon me — ?”

“This disease — if it leaves one alive, it often scars and blinds the eyes.”

His mother shook her head. “So distressing.”

His father had once taken him to see the aftermath of plague. His mother had never witnessed it. “Ava was raised in the orphanage, wasn’t she?” he asked. Ava was one of his mother’s ladies in waiting. “We will want her help.”

##

“Shall I tell you a story?” Ava asked.

The library was littered with maps and open books and calculations. The king was outside with the captain of the guard. Arturo was drumming his fingers on the desk. “I’ve always liked stories,” he said.

She stood. She was thin and plain and her dress was plain, but it seemed full of shadows. She swayed slightly, as if in a low wind, and her voice bowed and turned words through her narrative.

“There was a child long ago who lived

for ages in a dark cavern. How many ages, I cannot tell. She and other children who lived there never knew. In the cavern lived a sleeping dragon: sometimes it would wake, roar to life, and shake the darkness. Smoke would bellow from its nostrils, and stone would crumble from the cavern's roof. Many things are easily crushed beneath falling stone." She paused. "The children were often left without the small light they ever knew – the light of candles, under the earth."

"What were they looking for?" Arturo asked.

"The dragon's gold." She stilled. "In the darkness, the child would sing. A song is like gold – but more valuable than dragon's gold – and like light, but more fragile than the light of candles. A voice is easily silenced." She closed her eyes. "Yet some songs last for thousands of years – like frail pottery, dug from the earth – and this song was one of those. No one knew how long it went on in darkness, but at last there was another sound. If a song is like gold, this sound was like precious stones. It was the sound of a king, coming to slay the dragon."

Her voice altered to a more hesitant quality. "There was a feast afterwards, and the children sang to the king –"

"It was our own king, wasn't it?" Arturo asked. "I remember when he closed the child mines."

Ava smiled. "My face was so scarred. I had been so long under the earth — and I

was crying. I doubt he recognizes me —"

"He had been urging his father to close those mines for years. His father was too bound to custom . . . But what of the child?" he asked gently. "Did you live happily ever after?"

"Happily?" she repeated. "I had seen hope."

The king returned. "They'll send news of the orphanage: in the meantime, they are establishing the quarantine."

"And what about the procedure?" Arturo asked.

The king was shuffling maps on his desk. "It would require volunteers."

"The plague does not ask for volunteers."

"I can't order men to become sick with this, Arturo— any more than I can order them to blow themselves to bits —"

"Your compassion is misplaced," Arturo argued. "The future of all is more significant than any individual's present suffering —"

"Mother was saying something like that this morning. Thank you, Ava. I think we have a better idea of the situation. You are free to go."

Wait, Arturo signaled. "Ava not only waits on queens and kings. She also sings and tells stories. Won't you sing something for the king, before you go?"

When she sang, she looked even more spare and unornamented. Her voice had a clarity like water.

The color of pain is purple,
The dark, rushing purple of sea:
Joy is a swift flush of silver;
Green as a garland is glee;
Hope is a little blue flower
Pushing through leaden despair;
Deep down runs the red of desire,
Rising to dance a pink air.
And golden and grey are the castles of peace
Overgrown with the moss colored years.
But if you should ask me, what color is love?
I'd answer – what color are tears?

##

The stars were circling. Over his head, the sky wheeled like the shadow of a great bird whose flight was luminous; or like circles from a stone thrown into a dark pool. The ripples in the pool were of light. The moon had fallen, a stone into dark water, and the stars were fractured images of its silent weight under the surface. Or perhaps the moon was only a reflection, thrown back onto the sky. He peered over the dark pool until he could almost see a face shining back at him — covered with water. The eyes were diamonds. Diamonds crusted the lips, the cheeks were glimmering stars. He reached out to disturb the fluid veil . . .

##

The princess his mother had invited could not be diverted in her travels, and arrived before further news of the plague. She was shocked and saddened to hear of the danger to the children: her eyes were clear as glass. He could almost see his reflection in them.

When news came, it was of a quarantine

established around the affected area, with many villages evacuated – but not the orphanage. It was too central to the affected region, and several children had already been taken ill.

Arturo urged the king, “You must order the procedure. It’s the only chance for them.”

“It’s not a chance,” he cried. “It’s a rumor!”

Years ago when he was a prince, his father had entertained travelers from the East. They spoke of how their country had eliminated the plague through a procedure that involved scraping the matter of the pox into a small cut on a healthy person. This produced a period of milder sickness, without death or disfigurement.

Ava had asked permission to speak to the king, on hearing of the orphanage.

“I’d like to go.”

“Are you mad?” he began, then bit off his words. He would have liked to go, too.

“We’ll both go,” Arturo said. “We can start at dawn.”

“I cannot have you finding out if the

procedure works on children, Arturo,” the king raised his voice — “This is not a situation for guessing!”

Ava said, “You may find out if it works on me.”

“Both of us will have the procedure first,” Arturo said. “When we come to practice it on the children – we’ll sound like precious stones.” He winked at Ava.

She stood gazing at the king.

“They have no hope,” she said.

“Do you know the course of this disease?”

“Yes sir.”

“Describe it to me.”

“It starts with fever. Then it makes small marks in the mouth and throat. Then a rash of small boils on the body erupt and spread –”

“Have you witnessed it before?”

“No.”

“Am I to let you volunteer to have this disease?”

She said nothing.

“You’re asking to go off and possibly to die? Perhaps to no gain – simply to add another life to the suffering. And I’m to let you – why?”

She only looked at him.

“And what will you do, if you have to watch them die?”

“I’ll sing to them.”

“Maybe Arturo should learn to sing to you,” he left the room abruptly.

##

Ava was packing linens into a trunk: the king had come to see if she would not change her mind.

“You can’t possibly wear all of those,” he said.

“They’re for the children.”

It was raining. Raindrops on the stone sill were shuddering, pricked with gold from the candles. Her shadow, like reiterate rain, threw patterns of folding and packing

motions over and again on the walls – immaterial things raised, closing, and descending.

“I wish you would stop,” he said.

The shadows suspended. But he said nothing further, and the shadows resumed. The rain seemed to be folding something with blind fingers, smoothing over worn griefs, patiently folding and putting away.

“Do you also interpret dreams?” the king blurted. “I could almost think right now –”

Her motions over the walls again ceased.

“That you’re making it rain,” he half laughed. “That you’re somehow akin to it –”

She waited.

“I have dreams I don’t understand.

Dreams of a journey, and of beauty – a diamonded face — something I can’t find, that isn’t there, when I reach for it.”

“You dream of the princess.”

“Do you think so?” He scratched his forehead.

“All men dream of the princess,” she reached for another linen, “And the kingdom. That’s what the stories tell us.”

“Wait —”

She was still.

“No, no –” he protested. “You’re wrong. The kingdom – the best dream I have of the kingdom, I’m ashamed to confess. The kingdom holds me fast. I wish I could pack up like you and go out – to die, or find whatever it is that shakes my dreams. But I’m trapped under the kingdom like an ant. I’m always struggling to carry it the next step. I can never carry it so far. I wish I could shrug it off – let it sink where it falls, let it crush some other ant, and go out and find whatever men seek, that you and my mother call the princess.”

“Your mother is right that life is of little worth without the sort of thing you represent.”

“What can we possibly represent? We’re imprisoned in this castle dancing, unless we’re being defeated, like everyone else, by

plagues and poverty –?”

Her eyes burned darker and brighter until her face seemed to recede. “Something that enters our place of despair and turns it to precious stones. The vision we long for in death, and are digging into our darkness to find before we die.”

“Freedom?” He jerked out, almost involuntarily. “Justice? Honor? A full meal and a comfortable fire?”

She lowered her eyes.

“That’s what I try stand for,” he spoke tenderly, conscious of pain.

Her lips curved like a wound. “You’re forgetting the princess.”

“I’ll try to remember.” He didn’t know what else to say. “I’ll think of her when you’re –” the candles fluttered. “Don’t let them forget the trunk with your stories and songs,” he joked awkwardly from the doorway. The rain fell beyond the stone windows, folding shadows over stone walls as he groped down the dark flight of stairs.

##

It was Autumn again and rain was washing the leaves away in runnels, whirling them off down a system of dips and hollows in the forest floor. The streams were flowing not to the sea, but to a pattern etched under the earth — visible in their stigmata of veins. The worn leaves were being folded and put away. Further through stripped trees, he could almost make out a sense in the figure of streams. It was like one of the embossed letters in ancient books when he was learning to read: something he ought to recognize, a shimmering gilt calligraphy with a clear gleam. And then he realised his own face was raining — he was weeping the channels of water flowing with dead leaves. The wounds in the forest floor were carrying away a pain welling up in him from under the earth. He was making it rain. The figure of streams was casting him like a shadow — if he traced over it with his hands, he would find his

features . . . He could almost discern eyes in the figure, shimmering clear stones . . . lips limned with leaves, gem colored, already faded, choked with rain . . . he reached out . . .

He woke again empty-handed.

##

Arturo and Ava had crossed the deserted miles into the quarantined area. The wood was dripping in weak light, further stifled by drifting fog and smoke. They passed through patches of fetid air hanging nowhere, like dank clothes scattered over branches. The place was disturbed with sound: raucous barking from a few dogs circling a tree. Arturo had urged his horse forward to investigate.

He had laughed: a kitten! Ava slid from her horse, and picked up a dead branch.

“What under heaven –” Arturo unmounted and blocked her way. The tracery of trees behind her was hung with water drops.

“We should rescue it.”

“No!” He caught her arm. “We should not interfere.”

“But we’re hoping to interfere with the plague.”

“Each fights for their own kind in the realm of Nature. None of the lower animals fight for other kinds.”

The gleaming branches curled around her in a filigree. “Why should we leave a kitten to be torn to pieces by dogs?”

Smog drifted around them, blotting out the plaited trees. Only the glistening drops were visible like a map of stars. “The dogs may grow weary and go away,” he suggested.

“Or they may be terrified away by mercy.” He could not see the color of her eyes: they had disappeared in drift. The map of stars was gone. He was still gripping her arm and could find the outline of her face, but the eyes were blind. “You have forgotten that I too am part of nature.”

“But what would you have dogs eat?” he

insisted.

“Not this kitten.”

“What other animal will be attacked because we rescue this one?” He was becoming impatient. “Nature does not change for individuals! Nature is progress and retreat, balancing and compensating: everything prospers to the harm of something else. We can only seek the future of our own kind, and try not to interfere more than we have to.” Her arm ceased struggling. “Your mercy is blind havoc — suffering somewhere else.”

He still could not see her face: then he heard her weeping. He let go her arm, and groped for a branch.

What he found made him propel her quickly back to the horses — and, taking a knife and quill from his saddlebag: “Wait here”. Before he returned she had shattered

visions, blown in the mist, of a man kneeling over a prone form. Now the knife was between his teeth. Now his arm was bared.

They had traveled a little further when Arturo unmounted again in a clearing of light. He came to help her to the ground, his face unfathomable. There was a small cut on his arm.

“I’m sorry about the kitten,” he said. “It was better to leave the dogs alone. We don’t know what they have been into.”

“Do dogs also die of this disease?”

“No, but it’s unknown to us whether their bite can transfer it from the dead to the living.” He asked for her hand.

She shuddered. “What are we doing?” she asked. “Are we like dogs?”

He knelt in front of her, and asked again for her hand. She gave it to him — but she closed her eyes when she felt his knife.

##

There is a ruined tower by the sea
Where spume of wave is blown
Like glass and shattered easily
As shadows thrown
Within the tower. We

Are like waves, or towers,
Or glass in which unknown
Images seem, until our
Shadows shatter on the stone.

But tears will flower
Anywhere they’re sown,

— she sang, as they traveled on.

##

The candles fluttered with breath under the chandeliers. Light veined over darkness, and from within the darkness he heard music. It was a melody of tenuous pauses and trembling wings. The room was full of dim shapes: animals, children, lords and peasants — all waiting for a dance. He stepped toward the figure who represented a princess, and all the watchers stepped toward her. He raised his arm, and the dim watchers raised theirs. He bowed, and so did they. He was the whole throng of shadows. If he touched her face, their fingers would grope over beauty. If he drew back his hand, their hands would fall to their sides. Now they were still. The chandeliers were circling over them — crossing and recrossing, representing stars — ‘til he could almost fathom the significance of the sky. Cruciforms whirled around a moon. A princess was dancing while he stood still, unable to move his arms . . . Then the stars began to fall . . .

##

Then it was time for the court banquet. His mother invited the nobility. The princess wore gold and diamonds. Light trembled in her hair, from her ears, on her neck, casting glimmers around her, into her eyes.

She asked if there had been any news of the children. Arturo had been signaling daily to the sentries around the quarantined area: their news at the capitol was delayed. The plague had not spread outside of the quarantine. The princess observed that if the procedure worked, it would be a gain not only for the orphans, but for children in many kingdoms, for years to come. She spoke in an aura of fractured light of a woman who sat in their gate begging, blind and disfigured, who had survived the disease as a child.

It was during the banquet that news came: Arturo’s signals had not been seen for several

days. The messenger was to wait for orders.

“What further orders could he possibly send?” his mother commented. “The poor things. Yet we cannot risk the disease spreading further. We must wait until enough time has passed to presume safety.”

“I think he must surely send an embassy,” the princess said. “If a king can order men into battle, he can order men to the aid of children.”

“But a king leads men into battle.” They both turned to him.

“But a good king,” the princess said at last quietly, “is not as replaceable as a blacksmith, or tailor, or game warden, or common soldier. He leads men into battle because at the head of an army, he stands for something. He has the most skilled soldiers employed in guarding him. All men seek to protect the king.”

“And women too,” he smiled. “Would he be a good king, if he were more careless of the tailor’s life?” Her face was an exquisite pattern, beauty shattered and gathered in her gems.

“A good king affects more men in his death than a good tailor.” She had a gentle voice.

“That is true,” he said. “A king has a greater sphere. So the tailor’s mother or wife may feel that greater risk belongs to kings. I must give orders.”

“Don’t be gone long, dear,” his mother called. “They will be nearly ready for the dance—”

When he returned, she was remarking on the filigree of gold and diamonds in the elaboration of the princess’ hair. Light darted from the princess as she turned her head, flew around her like an ephemeral bird. Men never understand how much sacrifice is involved in beauty, his mother was saying. Her husband always thought she merely appeared in full regalia, but the beauty of queens demands patience and pains.

“Oh, here you are—”

But he had only come to wish them goodbye. The bird of light faltered over a wingbeat.

His mother followed him to the courtyard. “But my child--” she cried with anguish. “This is madness!

“And what of the dance?”

##

Leaves flew around him — amber and emerald, ruby, gold. A few rain-drenched, draggled leaves blew from the nearly bare branches, circling their flying speed. He wrapped his coat more tightly around his neck. His eyelashes and nose and lips dripped with rain, and he was empty: he had eaten nothing since they had seen the orphanage. They identified Arturo, but there was no sign of Ava or of anyone living, aside from recent cart tracks towards the sea. A tower rose ahead through fog.

The fog, turned gold at the edges, seemed almost lit from within when he dismounted in the courtyard. A child ran across stone flags, out of sight. A low door stood open and another child sat in it, holding its head. The king knelt, and it looked into his eyes.

“My head hurts.”

He felt its head with his hand — hot.

“She said to hold still, and think about puppies. It only hurts.” He held out his arm — there was a blister. Another child ran past them, carrying water.

“Did you get a little cut?” the king asked.

The child nodded. “He gave it to me. He made me stand in a line. Then he fell down.”

The king stood up. “Can you tell me where she is?” he asked.

“She told us about a mighty gale.”

He ducked inside. Fog was blowing in through the windows. A voice floated over it, clear as water, a trickle of cold sea down the wall of stone.

The veil is studded here and there with diamonds, the dew.

Far off and faint between the spheres, a bird is calling. . . .

He stepped from the low entrance into a high, round room. A few children lay on a straw mat that filled much of it. A shaft of light fell around the singer, sitting still on the far side. Mist floated over her face like a veil. Gold vapor curled around her shoulders, and her face shone indistinct within. He stepped closer.

. . . the world will gleam anew
Beneath the waters. Lo, the King is here.
His footsteps, soft and crystal clear
Fall on the courtyard where the leaves accrue —

Come, still your weeping.
Heaven is almost blue . . .

“Ava,” — he said.

She ceased, and turned her head. Her eyes were diamonds. Diamonds fell from her cheeks, studded her mouth. The veil of mist drifted around her and she stood —

“Arturo —?” she asked uncertainly.

“Ava?”

She covered her face with her hands.

He stepped closer, and she raised her face again. His pulse faltered. Ava was blind. Tears ran over scars on her face, tracing their pattern like jewels.

A child ran up and clung to her skirt. She fluffed its hair. “The orphanage was too full of sickness — Arturo sent us here. I wasn’t as sick as he: he thought we hadn’t waited long enough before we nursed the children. He said it would work better if we kept the healthy ones off til they recovered --”

The king swallowed: “He was with the children.”

She trembled.

He reached out his fingers: her eyes didn’t flicker. He hesitated, and then his hand closed over her shoulder.

##

Come, watch beside me, while
An early light begins to filter through:
Soundless, it splits the darkness into earth and sky,
Divides the firmament in two —
Far-off and faint between the spheres, a bird is calling.

The grey things quicken, and take on a greener hue:
The veil is lifting, studded here and there with diamonds, the dew;
The day is like a jewel in a forgotten fountain;
He is near Who wakes the sleepers.

The fountains will be garlanded again, the world will gleam anew
Beneath the waters. Lo, the King is here.
His footsteps, soft and crystal clear
Fall on the courtyard where the leaves accrue —

Come, still your weeping.
Heaven is almost blue;
And gentler rain than yesterday is falling.

The End