Ashputtle
or The Mother's Ghost
THREE VERSIONS OF ONE STORY

I THE MUTILATED GIRLS

But although you could easily take the story away from Ashputtle and centre it on the mutilated sisters – indeed, it would be easy to think of it as a story about cutting bits off women, so that they will fit in, some sort of circumcision-like ritual chop, nevertheless, the story always begins not with Ashputtle or her stepsisters but with Ashputtle’s mother, as though it is really always the story of her mother even if, at the beginning of the story, the mother herself is just about to exit the narrative because she is at death’s door: ‘A rich man’s wife fell sick, and, feeling that her end was near, she called her only daughter to her bedside.’

Note the absence of the husband/father. Although the woman is defined by her relation to him (‘a rich man’s wife’) the daughter is unambiguously hers, as if hers alone, and the entire drama concerns only women, takes place almost exclusively among women, is a fight between two groups of women – in the right-hand corner, Ashputtle and her mother; in the left-hand corner, the stepmother and her daughters, of whom the father is unacknowledged but all the same is predicated by both textual and biological necessity.

In the drama between two female families in opposition to one another because of their rivalry over men (husband/father, husband/son), the men seem no more than passive victims of their fancy, yet their significance is absolute because it is (‘a rich man’, ‘a king’s son’) economic.

Ashputtle’s father, the old man, is the first object of their desire and their dissension; the stepmother snatches him from the dead mother before her corpse is cold, as soon as her grip loosens. Then there is the young man, the potential bridegroom, the hypothetical son-in-law, for whose possession the mothers fight, using their daughters as instruments of war or as surrogates in the business of mating.

If the men, and the bank balances for which they stand, are the passive victims of the two grown women, then the girls, all three, are animated solely by the wills of their mothers. Even if Ashputtle’s mother dies at the beginning of the story, her status as one of the dead only makes her position more authoritative. The mother’s ghost dominates the narrative and is, in a real sense, the motive centre, the event that makes all the other events happen.

On her death bed, the mother assures the daughter: ‘I shall always look after you and always be with you.’ The story tells you how she does it.

At this point, when her mother makes her promise, Ashputtle is nameless. She is her mother’s daughter. That is all we know. It is the stepmother who names her Ashputtle, as a joke, and, in doing so, wipes out her real name, whatever that is, banishes her from the family, exiles her from the shared table to the lonely hearth among the cinders, removes her contingent but honourable status as daughter and gives her, instead, the contingent but disreputable status of servant.

Her mother told Ashputtle she would always look after her, but then she died and the father married again and gave Ashputtle an imitation mother with daughters of her own whom she loves with the same fierce passion as Ashputtle’s mother did and still, posthumously, does, as we shall find out.

With the second marriage comes the vexed question: who shall be the daughters of the house? Minel declares the stepmother and sets the freshly named, non-daughter Ashputtle to sweep and scrub and sleep on the hearth while her daughters lie between clean sheets in Ashputtle’s bed. Ashputtle, no longer known as the daughter of her mother, nor of her father either, goes by a dry, dirty, cinderly nickname for everything has turned to dust and ashes.

Meanwhile, the false mother sleeps on the bed where the real mother died and is, presumably, pleased by the husband/father in that bed, unless there is no pleasure in it for her. We are not told what the husband/father does as regards domestic or marital function, but we can surely make the assumption that he and the stepmother share a bed, because that is what married people do.

And what can the real mother/wife do about it? Burn as she might with love, anger and jealousy, she is dead and buried.

The father, in this story, is a mystery to me. Is he so besotted with his new wife that he cannot see how his daughter is soiled with kitchen refuse and filthy from her ash bed and always hard at work? If he sensed there was a drama in hand, he was content to leave the entire production to the women for, absent as he might be, always remember that it is in his house where Ashputtle sleeps on the cinders, and he is the invisible link that binds both sets of mothers and daughters in their violent equation. He is
the unmoved mover, the unseen organising principle, like God, and, like God, up he pops in person, one fine day, to introduce the essential plot device.

Besides, without the absent father there would be no story because there would have been no conflict.

If they had been able to put aside their differences and discuss everything amicably, they’d have combined to expel the father. Then all the women could have slept in one bed. If they’d kept the father on, he could have done the housework.

This is the essential plot device introduced by the father: he says, ‘I am about to take a business trip. What presents would my three girls like me to bring back for them?’

Note that: his three girls.

It occurs to me that perhaps the stepmother’s daughters were really, all the time, his own daughters, just as much his own daughters as Ashputtle, his ‘natural’ daughters, as they say, as though there is something inherently unnatural about legitimacy. That would realign the forces in the story. It would make his connivance with the ascendency of the other girls more plausible. It would make the speedy marriage, the stepmother’s hostility, more probable.

But it would also transform the story into something else, because it would provide motivation, and so on; it would mean I’d have to provide a past for all these people, that I would have to equip them with three dimensions, with tastes and memories, and I would have to think of things for them to eat and wear and say. It would transform ‘Ashputtle’ from the bare necessity of fairy tale, with its characteristic copula formula, ‘and then’, to the emotional and technical complexity of bourgeois realism. They would have to learn to think. Everything would change.

I will stick with what I know.

What presents do his three girls want?

‘Bring me a silk dress,’ said his eldest girl. ‘Bring me a string of pearls,’ said the middle one. What about the third one, the forgotten one, called out of the kitchen on a charitable impulse and drying her hands, raw with housework, on her apron, bringing with her the smell of old fire?

‘Bring me the first branch that knocks against your hat on the way home,’ said Ashputtle.

Why did she ask for that? Did she make an informed guess at how little he valued her? Or had a dream told her to use this random formula of unacknowledged desire, to allow blind chance to choose her present for her? Unless it was her mother’s ghost, awake and restless looking for a way home, that came into the girl’s mouth and spoke the request for her.

He brought her back a hazel twig. She planted it on her mother’s grave and watered it with tears. It grew into a hazel tree. When Ashputtle came out to weep upon her mother’s grave, the turtle dove crooned: ‘I’ll never leave you, I’ll always protect you.’

Then Ashputtle knew that the turtle dove was her mother’s ghost and she herself was still her mother’s daughter, and although she had wept and waited and longed to have her mother back again, now her heart sank a little to find out that her mother, though dead, was no longer gone and henceforward she must do her mother’s bidding.

Came the time for that curious fair they used to hold in that country, when all the resident virgins went to dance in front of the king’s son so that he could pick out the girl he wanted to marry.

The turtle dove was mad for that, for her daughter to marry the prince. You might have thought her own experience of marriage might have taught her to be wary, but no, needs must, what else is a girl to do? The turtle dove was mad for her daughter to marry so she flew in and picked up the new silk dress with her beak, dragged it to the open window, threw it down to Ashputtle. She did the same with the string of pearls. Ashputtle had a good wash under the pump in the yard, put on her stolen finery and crept out the back way, secretly, to the dancing grounds, but the stepsisters had to stay home and sulk because they had nothing to wear.

The turtle dove stayed close to Ashputtle, pecking her ears to make her dance vivaciously, so that the prince would see her, so that the prince would love her, so that he would follow her and find the clue of the fallen slipper, for the story is not complete without the ritual humiliation of the other woman and the mutilation of her daughters.

The search for the foot that fits the slipper is essential to the enactment of this ritual humiliation.

The other woman wants that young man desperately. She would do anything to catch him. Not losing a daughter, but gaining a son. She wants a son so badly she is prepared to cripple her daughters. She takes up a carving knife and chops off her elder daughter’s big toe, so that her foot will fit the little shoe.

Imagine.

Brandishing the carving knife, the woman bears down on her child, who is as distraught as if she had not been a girl but a boy and the old woman was after a more essential portion than a toe. ‘No!’ she screams. ‘Mother! No! Not the knife! No!’ But off it comes, all the same, and she throws it in the fire, among the ashes, where Ashputtle finds it, wonders at it, and feels both awe and fear at the phenomenon of mother love.

Mother love, which winds about these daughters like a shroud.
The prince saw nothing familiar in the face of the tearful young woman, one shoe off, one shoe on, displayed to him in triumph by her mother, but he said: 'I promised I would marry whoever the shoe fitted so I will marry you,' and they rode off together.

The turtle dove came flying round and did not croon or coo to the bridal pair but sang a horrid song: 'Look! Look! There's blood in the shoe!'

The prince returned the ersatz fiancée at once, angry at the trick, but the stepmother hastily lopped off her other daughter's heel and pushed that poor foot into the bloody shoe as soon as it was vacant so, nothing for it, a man of his word, the prince helped up the new girl and once again he rode away.

Back came the nagging turtle dove: 'Look!' And, sure enough, the shoe was full of blood again.

'Let Ashputtle try,' said the eager turtle dove.

So now Ashputtle must put her foot into the hideous receptacle, this open wound, still sick and warm as it is, for nothing in any of the many texts of this tale suggests the prince washed the shoe out between the fittings. It was an ordeal in itself to put a naked foot into the bloody shoe, but her mother, the turtle dove, urged her to do so in a soft, cooing croon that could not be denied.

If she does not plunge without revulsion into this open wound, she won't be fit to marry. That is the song of the turtle dove, while the other mad mother stood impotently by.

Ashputtle's foot, the size of the bound foot of a Chinese woman, a stump. Almost an amputee already, she put her tiny foot in it.

'Look! Look!' cried the turtle dove in triumph, even while the bird betrayed its ghostly nature by becoming progressively more and more immaterial as Ashputtle stood up in the shoe and commenced to walk around. Squelch, went the stump of the foot in the shoe. Squelch. 'Look!' sang out the turtle dove. 'Her foot fits the shoe like a corpse fits the coffin!

'See how well I look after you, my darling!'

2 THE BURNT CHILD

A burnt child lived in the ashes. No, not really burnt – more charred, a little bit charred, like a stick half-burned and picked off the fire. She looked like charcoal and ashes because she lived in the ashes since her mother died and the hot ashes burned her so she was scabbed and scarring. The burnt child lived on the hearth, covered in ashes, as if she were still mourning.

After her mother died and was buried, her father forgot the mother and
'Make your own dress, next time,' said the bird. 'I'm through with that bloody business.'

The burned child went into the kitchen to show herself to the man. She was not burned any more, but lovely. The man left off looking at the stepmother and looked at the girl.

'Come home with me and let your stepmother stay and rake the ashes,' he said to her and off they went. He gave her a house and money. She did all right.

'Now I can go to sleep,' said the ghost of the mother. 'Now everything is all right.'

3 TRAVELLING CLOTHES

The stepmother took the red-hot poker and burned the orphan's face with it because she had not raked the ashes. The girl went to her mother's grave. In the earth her mother said: 'It must be raining. Or else it is snowing. Unless there is a heavy dew tonight."

'It isn't raining, it isn't snowing, it's too early for the dew. My tears are falling on your grave, mother.'

The dead woman waited until night came. Then she climbed out and went to the house. The stepmother slept on a feather bed, but the burned child slept on the hearth among the ashes. When the dead woman kissed her, the scar vanished. The girl woke up. The dead woman gave her a red dress.

'I had it when I was your age.'

The girl put the red dress on. The dead woman took worms from her eyesockets; they turned into jewels. The girl put on a diamond ring.

'I had it when I was your age.'

They went together to the grave.

'Step into my coffin.'

'No,' said the girl. She shuddered.

'I stepped into my mother's coffin when I was your age.'

The girl stepped into the coffin although she thought it would be the death of her. It turned into a coach and horses. The horses stamped, eager to be gone.

'Go and seek your fortune, darling.'

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Alice in Prague
or The Curious Room

This piece was written in praise of Jan Svankmayer, the animator of Prague, and his film of Alice

In the city of Prague, once, it was winter.

Outside the curious room, there is a sign on the door which says 'Forbidden'. Inside, inside, oh, come and see! The celebrated Dr Dee.

The celebrated Dr Dee, looking for all the world like Santa Claus on account of his long, white beard and apple cheeks, is contemplating his crystal, the fearful sphere that contains everything that is, or was, or ever shall be.

It is a round ball of solid glass and gives a deceptive impression of weightlessness, because you can see right through it and we falsely assume an equation between lightness and transparency, that what the light shines through cannot be there and so must weigh nothing. In fact, the Doctor's crystal ball is heavy enough to inflict a substantial injury and the Doctor's assistant, Ned Kelly, the Man in the Iron Mask, often weighs the ball in one hand or tosses it back and forth from one to the other hand as he ponders the fragility of the hollow bone, his master's skull, as it pores heedless over some tome.

Ned Kelly would blame the murder on the angels. He would say the angels came out of the sphere. Everybody knows the angels live there.

The crystal resembles: an aqueous humour, frozen:

a glass eye, although without any iris or pupil—just the sort of transparent eye, in fact, which the adept might construe as apt to see the invisible;

a tear, round, as it forms within the eye, for a tear acquires its characteristic shape of a pear, what we think of as a 'tear' shape, only in the act of falling;