

Mr. Fox



HELEN OYEYEMI

RIVERHEAD BOOKS

a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

New York

2011

FITCHER'S BIRD

Miss Foxe referred to herself as a florist, but really she was a florist's assistant. She swept plant debris off the shop floor, and she wrapped flowers for the customers and did everything else that the shop owner, Mrs. Nash, didn't feel like doing. Miss Foxe wasn't allowed to cut and arrange the flowers used in the window display; nor was she allowed to advise people on the perfect floral gift. Miss Foxe knew much more about flowers than Mrs. Nash, but all she could do was listen while Mrs. Nash told the anxious relatives of springtime invalids to send pink azaleas. Evidently Mrs. Nash was not aware that in the language of flowers azaleas meant "take care of yourself for me." A touching thought, but by giving a sick person a bunch of azaleas you were telling them that they were on their own. Mrs. Nash's agenda was simply to shift stock. In summer Mrs. Nash prescribed marigolds left, right, and centre—for birthdays, apologies, and romantic overtures—even though those flowers were better as especial comfort to the heart-sick. But Miss Foxe kept all that to herself, for fear of losing

her job. As it was, Mrs. Nash snapped at her and called her slow and asked her if she was an idiot nineteen times a day. Miss Foxe liked to be near the flowers, especially in winter, when it was easy to forget that there had ever been such a thing as a flower.

Flowers, and thoughts of flowers, were Miss Foxe's main occupation. She didn't especially care for motion pictures; she found them too noisy. She would have liked to have had friends to lend books to and borrow pie dishes from. But it was difficult for Miss Foxe to reach that stage with anyone. She spoke so quietly that people couldn't understand what she was saying and quickly lost patience. When she paid for things in shops, the change was invariably placed on the counter instead of in her hand. Miss Foxe occasionally wondered if she had spent her life approaching invisibility and had finally arrived at it. She encouraged herself to see her very small presence in the world as a good thing, a power, something that a hero might possess.

Miss Foxe's other passion was fairy tales. She loved the transformations in them. Everybody was in disguise, or on their way to becoming something else. And all was overcome by order in the end. Love could not prevail if the order of the tale didn't wish it, and neither could hatred, nor grief, nor cunning. If you were the first of three siblings, then you were going to make a big mistake, and that was that. If you were the third sibling, you couldn't fail. *Here is the truth about everything*, Miss Foxe would think, after a night with Madame d'Aulnoy, or Madame de Villeneuve.

Flowers and fairy tales were all very well, but they began to take their toll on her. Independently and in unison they made insinuations, the flowers and the fairy tales. When Mrs. Nash was being especially nasty, Miss Foxe imagined herself surrounded by leafy branches that changed as her tears dripped onto them—glossy green tips shrank and smoothed into skin; the branches gripped her firmly, like arms. . . .

One morning Miss Foxe gave in. It was high time she found herself a companion. But how, and where? She knew what kind of man she wanted: someone passionate, someone who would understand her. But she didn't meet people. Every man who came into the flower shop was invariably attached, or had someone else in mind.

Miss Foxe went to bars, and was overlooked with a thoroughness that chilled her marrow. She had chosen seedy bars on purpose, bars where (she had heard Mrs. Nash say) the men were voracious and anything went. And it was true. Even cross-eyed girls who laughed like hyenas were bought drinks. Anything went but Miss Foxe. She wasn't bad-looking—it was just that it took a great deal of effort to be able to actually see her, especially in noisy, crowded places.

Miss Foxe tried libraries, but talking wasn't allowed.

Miss Foxe tried bookshops but was frightened off every time she saw the titles of the books the interesting-looking men happened to be holding. Such weighty and joyless words: *Fear and Trembling*, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, and the like.

One afternoon Mrs. Nash barked at her. "You've been late back from lunch five days running now. Explain yourself. And don't fob me off with any more lies, or you'll be out of work."

Miss Foxe explained that she had been trying different things.

"What does that mean? Spit it out."

"I've been looking in the bookshops for a gentleman friend," poor Miss Foxe stammered.

Mrs. Nash threw her head back and laughed for ten minutes without stopping. Then she said, "You'd better advertise."

And that is what Miss Foxe did. In a national newspaper, no less.

Fairy-tale princess seeks fairy-tale prince. Sarcastic and/or ironic replies will be ignored; I am in earnest, and you had better be, too.

If the advertisement sounded as if Miss Foxe was fed up, that's because she was.

As a result of her advertisement, Miss Foxe received seventeen moderately interesting propositions, fifteen pages of lunatic verse (from fifteen different lunatics), twelve sarcastic and/or ironic replies (six of each), and a single foxglove wrapped in clear cellophane. The foxglove was accompanied by a card that read: *Fitcher*. The name was printed above an address not too far from where Miss Foxe lived.

Miss Foxe held the flower and walked all around her bedroom in quick circles. Her steps sped up so that she was

almost running. She felt her heart beating in her fingertips. She knew the foxglove's meaning in the language of flowers—beauty and danger, poison and antidote. The digitalis made the heart contract. If your heart was too slow, then it worked to make you well. If your heart was sound, the digitalis killed. This Fitcher, whoever he was, understood the beautiful risk of the fairy tale. She wrote to Fitcher at once, and three days later he met her at a coffee shop after work.

Fitcher bemused Miss Foxe. He looked at her. He looked at her eyes, her ears, her teeth, her neck, her breasts. And he was a quiet man but not in the way that she was quiet. His quiet was of the measured kind, entered into to conceal his thoughts. He stepped noiselessly upon the floor. She dreaded that at first.

"Is Fitcher your only name?" she asked him.

He answered: "I have no other."

They spoke of fairy tales, and found their tastes were exactly matched. Encouraged, she met him again, and again. At their fourth meeting, as they walked between glass cases at the British Museum, Fitcher threaded Miss Foxe's fingers through his own. She froze. She did not find it easy to be touched by Fitcher; she found that her hand was warming his, and that though his hand was strong, it moved gently with hers.

At their sixth meeting, Fitcher brought Miss Foxe a nightingale in a gold-painted cage. He set the cage down on the shop counter and draped a black cloth over it. And

the bird sang out its hope, the silly little romantic calling out for a mate, not caring if this nightfall was a trick.

Mrs. Nash approved of Fitcher. "A proper Romeo, that one," she said.

"He doesn't talk much, though," Miss Foxe confided. "It worries me."

"It's better that way," Mrs. Nash returned. "Pay attention to what he does, not what he says—that's the rule."

And to this she added various other adages, such as "It's in his kiss," etc.

By their seventh meeting, Miss Foxe had grown so sure of Fitcher that she felt ready for the next step. She invited him to her flat, where she cooked him dinner and they drank wine by candlelight. Fitcher seemed appreciative but as usual said little. At last they were sitting on the sofa, together. She fed him bites of lemon tart. Fitcher looked as if he was enjoying both the food and the attention. Once that was over with, Miss Foxe reached behind the sofa and produced an antique sword that had been in her family for many years. It was half her height, and heavy, but shiny and sharp, as she had recently had it oiled and sharpened. She laid the sword across their laps.

"Take this sword," Miss Foxe said solemnly, "and cut off my head!"

Fitcher and Miss Foxe both fell to thinking of their favourite fairy tale, *The White Cat*, and the enchanted princess, pleading with her love to strike the blow that would release her from her animal form.

"Are you sure?" Fitcher asked. From Miss Foxe's bedroom, the nightingale sang in its cage.

Miss Foxe sighed. "Don't you believe . . . ?"

"Oh, I do," said Fitcher. "I do." And without further argument he unsheathed the sword and cleaved Miss Foxe's head from her neck. He knew what was supposed to happen. He knew that this awkward, whispering creature before him should now transform into a princess—dazzlingly beautiful, free, and made wise by her hardship.

That is not what happened.