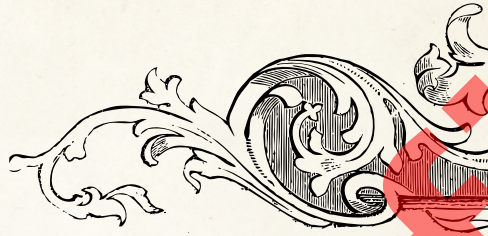


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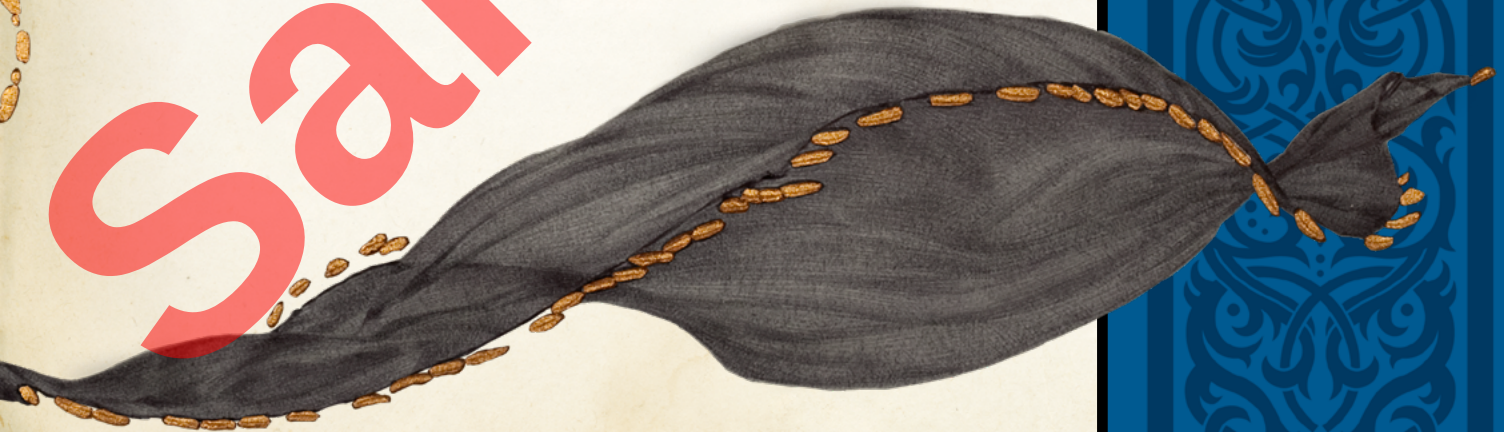
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INTRODUCTION:

Her Many Faces





he first time I read “Bluebeard” was in a fairy tale collection. I was young, and the morbid tale was nestled between “Little Red Riding Hood” and “Puss in Boots.” I would obsess over the first tale in the coming years, but “Bluebeard” stuck with me as well. It seemed especially unfair, even by the oddball logic found in fairy tales.

The poor wife was obviously set up to meet her doom, and Bluebeard seemed so forbidding in the etchings.

I was outraged at the injustice of it all, but my younger self also wondered how the Bride could be so stupid as to fall for such a trap. Much like you might yell at the screen in a horror movie—warning drunken teenagers away from a dark basement—I wanted to shake the Bride and ask her, “Why did you go in? What did you think would happen?”



But as I read more versions of the tale, I saw how cleverly Bluebeard's trap had been constructed, bound up in social conventions and gender assumptions, and I began to see the warning in it. I saw that Perrault's version of the story has only fragments of the Bride in it at all. We know very little of her, not even her name. Sometimes she has a sister named Anne or brothers, and always a mother and an unmentioned or deceased father. It might be said that she was pretty, or curious about the world, but often she is simply the Bride. Anonymous and vulnerable.

She could be any of us.

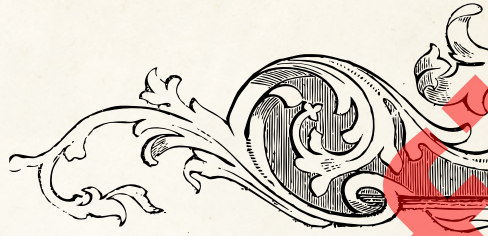
Modern retellings of the story fight against the Bride as a blank slate, bestowing a name or a specific setting on the protagonist. Sometimes modern tales even focus on the Bride's history or family, while others focus on Bluebeard himself.

The version of the tale presented here spends its time with the Bride. We follow her around Bluebeard's house, and see the mansion through her eyes; we find what Bluebeard has to offer in marriage and in death. And at the end, the book asks you to make a choice for the Bride. I hope you make the right one.

The Bride may not yet be named, but this is *her* story...

Sarah Richardson
Lead Developer for BLUEBEARD'S BRIDE





CHAPTER ONE:

Lovers Are Wed





In a village on the edge of
nowhere and everywhere
lived a woman with good
breeding but little money.

She lived in a small cottage
covered in roses in the summer,
along with her two daughters.

The elder daughter was fair to behold,
with black hair and dark skin, but
she had few suitors; the men in their
village were put off by her curiosity. The
younger daughter was plainer, with light
brown hair, but quicker to laugh. She
was too young for suitors, but only just.

One fine fall day, a lord visited the village. It
was rumored he was a widower many times
over. Many whispered that his wives had all
mysteriously disappeared. The lord was known
to everyone as Bluebeard, for although the hair
on his head was dark and streaked with grey,
his beard was a deep and unmistakable blue.



A blue beard is strange, but few would argue that a blue beard alone would make a man repugnant. However, for all of Bluebeard's finery, manners, or appraising gaze, his beard was impossible to ignore—its dismal color familiar only to those who find the molted feathers of a bird long since dead. The entangled, chaotic blue monstrosity upon his chin smelled faintly of sulfur, a foulness birthed in the deepest fires of hell. Bluebeard was much disliked in town.

The lord went to the cottage covered with dying roses and asked for the elder daughter's hand in marriage. She refused him. The village agreed in their gossip that, for once, the elder daughter was a sensible woman for her choice.

That night, the elder daughter spoke to her younger sister of Bluebeard's proposal. "Anne," the elder sister mused, "Am I wrong to so swiftly reject the lord?"

"No, sister, no." Anne shook her head. "And these words are born not of my fear for losing you, but from a deep feeling in my soul. There is something not right about him. Remember the tales we heard of all his other brides. Where have they all gone?"

"You are right, my love. It is strange that such tales should swirl around him without any refutation. The color of his beard is a sign—he is marked by some darker force." The elder sister ran the strands of her sister's soft brown locks through her fingers, weaving them between her digits, braiding them.

“...and the rumors,” Anne added.

“...and the rumors,” the elder sister agreed. She decidedly placed Bluebeard out of her thoughts. There would be other more suitable suitors, eventually.



Weeks later, the elder daughter happily strolled towards the village with a parcel under her arm. Within days of the dismissed proposal, the lord had become a remote memory in her mind, a strange disruption in a life of contented repetition. It was a beautiful, sunny day. A cool summer breeze flowed in from the east. Birds sang. She smiled up at the trees, enjoying her midday walk.

“WHERE ARE YOU OFF TO ON SUCH A FINE DAY?” a voice called out to her. The voice was deep and heavy, and she felt her shoulders stoop beneath it. The once happy sun now glared down upon her. Sweat beaded in the small of her back, and the cloth stuck to her skin. The birds stopped.

The maiden turned to see Bluebeard sitting like a sultan atop a great steed. The horse was the color of coal just before it is set alight, an oily black so deep it shined sapphire in the sun. On the great beast’s head was a golden bridle affixed with small flowers, swords, and stags. If not for the occasional movement of the beast’s chest, the elder sister would have thought it a statue for its perfection.

"My mother asked me to bring a parcel into town for her." She motioned towards the village. "I must deliver it without delay."

"IT SEEMS WE'RE HEADED TO THE SAME PLACE. MAY I ESCORT YOU?"

Not wishing to be seen as rude or improper, she conceded to his request. Bluebeard dismounted to walk next to the young woman. The great beast walked alongside. She quickened her pace, hoping to end the unpleasant engagement before it could begin, but Bluebeard easily kept time with her strides.

Nary a wind came to carry the sweat from her brow, but the young woman was sure most of her discomfort came from the silence building between them. She imagined the lord felt the sting of her rejection, and this weight must be the burden of his embarrassment. He had offered her much with his proposal: wealth, a home, a family.

She decided to break the silence.

"I have spied your house a few times when visiting my brothers afar. It is a fine home with beautiful gardens."

"BEAUTIFUL, YES," Bluebeard said, "BUT EMPTY."

"My lord..."

"I KNOW WHAT YOU WISH TO SAY NEXT, BUT YOU NEEDN'T. I SHOULD OFFER MY APOLOGIES. I'VE SEEN YOU A FEW TIMES, AS YOU MY HOME, AND WISHED TO KNOW YOU. IN MY HASTE, I'D FORGOTTEN MY MANNERS. I WOULD VERY MUCH LIKE TO SHOW YOU WHO I AM."

Startled, she turned to Bluebeard. The kindness of his words tugged at her kind heart, but again her focus was drawn to his beard—the cerulean serpent upon his chin so very hard to ignore. Swallowing her fear, the woman pressed on with a new question.

"You are a wealthy and learned man." She hesitated, afraid of causing offense, but curiosity overwhelmed her caution. "I must ask, what interests you in a simple woman such as myself? There are many beauties greater, and wits keener."

"YOU ARE AN INQUISITIVE ONE, AREN'T YOU? IS MY INTEREST NOT ENOUGH?"

The woman's cheeks flushed red with shame. It did seem as if she always needed more. To explore. To know. To see for herself. For all her beauty, it was curiosity that was her strongest trait, something not to be praised in a maiden.

"No, it is enough," the maiden conceded. Or at least it should be... his query caused her to doubt her own needs.

So the two walked into the village together, through the tree-lined path dotted with wild flowers, the final scent of summer drifting in their direction. Bluebeard knew the names of each flower, tree, and bird that called out in the midday sun.

"A HUNTER MUST KNOW THE WILDS."



In the village, the maiden delivered her parcel to the postman, as Bluebeard tended to his horse outside.

"A strange fellow," the postman remarked.

"Indeed," she replied, distracted by the form Bluebeard cut through the cloudy glass of the window. Through the pane, his features partially obscured, the man's beard struck her as more grey than blue.

How very strange the tricks light can play on the eyes.



Bluebeard's figure was that of a man who was often outdoors, hunting and riding. Her thoughts wandered under his clothes to the curve of his calf, the chiseled flatness of his chest, and through all the deft manners by which a hunter could use his body. A blush rose to her cheeks at this forward thought.

"I've heard he's had many wives before. All who've died of various ailments."

"Strange," she murmured, straining to view more of the lord through the window. The postman's interruption did not deter her gaze.

She focused back on the postman as Bluebeard strode behind the horse. The postman continued, "By all accounts a fine lord, with many riches. Yet, something about his visage is alien to me. Terrifying and sickening." The postman gave the woman's fears life, breathing them into the world with each syllable.

"He does speak kindly," the maiden suggested, a small fear in her stomach making her wonder if somehow the lord could hear her, even through a closed window.

"Yes, but there is a wickedness behind his smile..."

"...as if each word must consume the one before it. Hungry. Insatiable." She clutched at her lips. *What was she thinking to speak so to a man?*

"Exactly," the postman concluded, passing the woman a receipt.