

Singing Wind

In Beauty be it finished
-Native American proverb

Long ago, there was a girl named Singing Wind, whose hair was the longest and blackest of all the girls in the village, and whose face was more beautiful than any of the others as well. Her people lived in a village on the Ikahiri Plain, and moved about from year to year to plant their crops in fresh soil. It was a good life, and Singing Wind was the happiest of them all.

But it happens at times that too much fame and beauty can lead to difficulties, and so it was with Singing Wind.

There was in those days a certain Witch named Alitha who lived alone in a hut in the woods, and in time the tale of the beauty of Singing Wind came to her ears. She was at once filled with a jealous rage, for although she was very ugly, she fancied herself the most beautiful lady in all the Plain. No one had ever dared to tell her otherwise, for she was much too powerful and dangerous for that.

She was able, when she chose, to transform herself into a hideous monster that no one dared to fight. Alitha could become a dead skull with glowing eyes that rolled about and spewed forth coals and flame to burn anything that came near her to ashes.

And so it was that Alitha walked into the village one day, and demanded to be taken to the headman's house. The people dared not refuse, for they knew who she was. The Witch and the fear of her had gone wide throughout the lands.

When she came to the headman's house, Alitha got right to the point.

"Headman, I know you have a girl in your village by the name of Singing Wind, said by some to be beautiful. You will bring her here immediately, and she will come to live with me, and then you and your people must depart from this place immediately and go to live far away," the Witch commanded him. The headman was considered brave, and his warriors also, but none of them dared to say no to the Witch, for they knew she could lay waste to the entire village and reduce them all to ashes if she chose.

Therefore the headman sent for Singing Wind, and told her what must be, that she should go to live with the Witch. Singing Wind wept and tore her clothes, but there was no help, for she saw that the headman would not resist the evil one. Therefore she calmed herself, and arose from her seat, and spoke to the headman calmly.

"Sir, if I'm to go with the Witch, there are three things I'll have to take with me," she told him.

“You can’t take any weapons, nor anything valuable,” the headman warned her. Singing Wind agreed to this, and fetched a small bundle from a shelf in the house. Then she went with the headman to the front of his hut.

When the Witch saw the beauty of Singing Wind, she was amazed, but her heart was filled all the more with hatred and spite. She opened the bundle that Singing Wind had brought, but it contained only a plum twig, a small bottle of water, and a mussel shell. The Witch cared nothing for these things and allowed her to keep them. Then she took the girl to her own hut, after remaining long enough to make certain that the people of the village had fled far away.

And so Singing Wind was left alone with her tormentor. For the Witch was very hateful, and heaped all manner of cruelties upon Singing Wind whenever she could. She would frequently stab her with sharp thorns when she passed close by, or force her to rake up hot coals with her bare hands so that her skin was burned and blackened. She refused to allow her to ever wash her hair or to bathe in the stream close by, or to make new clothes for herself. In the fall when the hut was invaded by hideous black roaches, Alitha forced her to eat them. In this way the Witch hoped to destroy Singing Wind’s beauty and turn her into a bitter and fearful slave. Alitha threatened her that if she ever tried to escape, that she would hunt her down and burn her to ashes, along with anyone who dared to help her.

Singing Wind pretended to be terrified of the Witch, and in truth she did fear her, but she had courage, and refused to give up the idea of escaping and returning to her people. And although she was forced to live in filth and cruelty, she was just as beautiful as she had always been, for true beauty shines from the heart, like a fire that can never be put out.

Now it happened by and by that the Witch had business of her own to attend to in other parts, and she wished to go off on her own for a time. However, she was gripped by the fear that Singing Wind might take this chance to try to escape her, and she was determined that this should not happen.

Therefore the Witch announced her intention to leave, and again threatened Singing Wind with horrible consequences if she dared set foot beyond the vicinity of the hut. Then the Witch pretended to depart, but in fact she went only a short distance from the hut and hid herself behind a tree to see what her prisoner would do.

Singing Wind was no fool, and she continued to do her work about the yard and the hut, without so much as a glance towards the deep woods where she might try to escape. After a time, the Witch was satisfied that Singing Wind would not dare to leave the hut, and she departed to take care of her other business.

Singing Wind waited for a time, until she was certain that the Witch was far away, and then she acted quickly. She gathered her bundle of possessions, and departed from the Witch's hut immediately.

She was not so foolish as to think she would be able to escape from the Witch without help, and so she headed at once for the den of a certain Bear who lived not far away and who might be able to protect her.

It was not long before Singing Wind approached the home of the Bear, and as she came to his den she called aloud to him.

"Oh, great Bear, I'm in terrible trouble, for a powerful monster is after me, and there's no one who can help me but you," she cried. And the Bear heard her plea, and lumbered out slowly to meet her. He looked upon her beauty, and he was inclined in his heart to help her. Therefore he said,

"Tell me then, lass. . . what's this monster you fear? I'll crush it with one flick of my little claw," he boasted, and held up his paw. And Singing Wind was glad, for she thought the Bear would save her.

"Great Bear, I'm being chased by the evil Witch Alitha, and if you hadn't helped me then I would have been lost," she thanked him. But the Bear was startled when he heard that name, and a new attitude came over his face.

"Ah, no! Not the Witch! For she will set fire to my fur and burn me to ashes, and you along with me! Great though I am, I dare not fight against the Witch. But go to the Mountain Lion, and perhaps he may be able to help you. Now go!" the Bear ordered her, his eyes bulging in terror. And he turned tail and hid himself deep in his den.

Singing Wind hid her fear, and would not give up. She wasted no time on the Bear anymore, but set out at once for the cave of the Mountain Lion, in the hope that he might be more brave.

In the meantime the Witch had returned from her trip sooner than Singing Wind had thought, and she flew into a rage when she found the girl gone. She muttered her curses and took her skull shape, and her wicked red eyes glowed fiercely with hate. She suspected the Bear at once, and set off to see him, for she was determined that the girl should not escape.

She came to the den of the Bear before long, for she could roll very swiftly when she needed to.

"Have you seen a young girl pass this way, old Bear? Tell me at once, or I'll burn you to ashes, you filthy old flat-foot," she demanded. And the Bear stuck the tip of his nose from his cave, and in a voice that trembled he answered her back.

“Yes, I’ve seen her. She asked me for help, but I gave none. She headed that way, toward the cave of the Lion,” he told her in fear, pointing his paw toward the west.

“Hah,” the Witch grumbled, and paid no more mind, rolling off quickly.

So fast did she roll, it was not very long till she saw Singing Wind just ahead, and she laughed to herself, spewing coals all about.

Singing Wind heard the monster and said nothing else, but she reached into her bag and pulled out the plum twig. She broke it in half, and threw the pieces down behind her. At once there arose such a thick, tangled mass of thorny plum trees that she knew it would take the skull quite some time to burn its way through. And in the meantime she came to the cave of the Mountain Lion.

She stopped, out of breath, and called to him quickly.

“Great Lion, please help me! A terrible monster is hot on my heels, and no one can save me but you,” she cried out. And the Mountain Lion blinked in the bright noonday sun, and Singing Wind’s beauty was such that he decided to help her. Therefore he said,

“And what is this poor puny monster you fear? Why, I could crush it with one flick of my little claw,” he told her, and held up his paw. But Singing Wind hesitated, for she remembered the Bear.

“Great Lion, the Witch named Alitha is coming, and- ” she began, but the Cat cut her off. A look of bright terror came over his face.

“The Witch will burn both of us right down to ashes! There’s nothing I can do against a monster like that! But go to the Snake, and perhaps he will help you. I dare not. Now go!” the Cat said, and fled into his cave.

Singing Wind was frightened, but she still kept on, for what else could she do except wait for the skull?

In the meantime the Witch had burned her way through the thicket, and came to the cave of the Mountain Lion.

“Milk licker! Where has that ugly girl gone, for I know she came here to see you!” the Witch demanded.

And the Lion poked only his nose from his cave, and with trembling and terror he answered the Witch.

“She went that way, oh great one, to see the old Snake. I gave her no help, I promise!” he cried. The Witch said no more to the Cat, and rolled off, and before long she had almost caught up with her prey.

“Now I’ve got you!” she cried, coming close indeed. But Singing Wind reached for her bundle, and pulled out the bottle of water inside. She poured it all out on the path

right behind her, and at once there arose a wide lake between them. The lake was so wide, and so icy and deep, that she knew it would take quite some time to get around it. That gave her time to get to the Snake.

Before too much longer, the girl reached a place where a deep hole was dug, and that, she thought, must be where the Snake lived.

“Great Snake, there’s no one to save me but you, for a monster is chasing me that no one can resist,” she cried. And the Snake heard her cries, and slithered swiftly to meet her. He hissed when he saw her, her beauty was so great, and he thought he would help her, if only for that.

“So tell me, then. . . what is this poor little monster you fear? I will crush it with one flick of my tail,” he boasted, and rattled his tines. And Singing Wind was happy, for the Snake seemed sure. But she thought of the Bear and the Cat, and she feared.

“Great Snake, the evil Witch Alitha has followed me here, and unless you destroy her I fear all is lost,” she told him.

“Sss, no!” the Snake hissed, “Not the Witch! She will roast me for supper and burn you to ashes! You are lost!” the Snake told her, and dived underground.

Singing Wind was in terror now, for there was nowhere else to go, and before long the Witch would overtake her. But she still kept on, for what else could she do?

Indeed, before long the old Witch rolled up close, laughing and spewing her burning hot coals.

And Singing Wind reached in her bag one more time, to take out the very last thing that she had, and that was the mussel shell, shiny and white. She crushed the shell and threw it behind her, and at once the ground was covered with glittering diamonds, so many and so bright that the Witch could not count them.

She was sure of catching the girl at that point, so she stopped there awhile and took her own form. She picked up the diamonds as fast as she could, but there were so many it took quite some time. And then when she finally picked them all up, she found a little bag in the folds of her dress to put them inside, and the bag she hid in the hole of a tree, where it would be safe till she came back for it later. Then at last she took form as a skull once again, and rolled off after the girl she hated.

Singing Wind at last had come to a river, and it blocked her way forward completely. It was too wide to swim and too deep to wade, and at last she despaired of escaping.

But at the edge of the river she spied a tall boy, and not far down the bank was a solid wood hut. She had nothing to lose, and no time to think, so she went to the handsome young man.

“Boy, there’s a monster that intends to destroy me, and none of the Beasts will help. Can you hide me awhile, till the monster is gone?” she pleaded.

And the boy saw her beauty, and he loved her at once, but he said nothing of that just yet.

“My name is Little Bear, and of course I will. Go inside the hut and hide under the bed, and if the monster does come then I’ll kill it for you,” he promised. Singing Wind didn’t believe him, but took his advice, hoping to flee back the way she had come. The Witch might give up looking, sooner or later.

So she went in the hut and crawled under the bed, and there she waited for the skull to come. Little Bear stayed by the river outside, calm as can be, with a red wooden club in his hand.

In time the skull came, hateful and ugly, her eyes glowing red as hot coals. She saw the wide river and the tall young man, and Singing Wind nowhere in sight.

“Have you seen an ugly girl pass by, young man? If you have, tell me quickly which way did she go?” the Witch threatened, spitting out a few sparks.

Little Bear shrugged his strong shoulders a bit, either not scared at all or hiding it well.

“The girl is inside, and she is my guest. So turn tail and run, old Monster,” he told her. The Witch was so shocked by this threat from the boy that at first she was speechless, but soon flew into a rage.

“Very well, then. I’ll burn you both to ashes!” she screamed, and her eyes began to glow.

But before she could spew out her flaming hot coals, the boy raised the sacred red club high above her. And then, with one leap and a terrible cry, he smashed down the club between her eyes.

The skull cracked and shattered into a thousand small pieces, then Little Bear told his guest to come see.

Singing Wind stared at the broken up skull, all that was left of the terrible Witch, and then she looked back at the boy who had killed her.

“But how?” she asked wonderingly, touching a piece. She wondered, at first, if he was even truly human. For what normal man could have done such a thing?

“It was only a skull after all, you know. If you hit hard enough, it will break,” he replied.

“But the Beasts were in terror, and my people as well,” she insisted, still not quite believing it. Little Bear shrugged his shoulders.

“Ah, so was I, but I love you, you see, and how else was I ever to save you, if I lacked the courage to try?” he asked.

“You might have been killed, and us both burned to ashes,” she said, but her heart was full.

“Maybe so, but we weren’t, and I still love you dearly,” he told her, with a practical smile. She laughed, for what else could she answer to that? So she took him with joy, and their love was deep.

Together they ground up the skull into powder, and burned it to ashes in a fire they built. In the spring they set out from that place by the river, and soon found her people not far across the Plain.

The people rejoiced at the story they told, and the death of the Witch filled them all with awe. The headman was shamed, for it was whispered among the huts that a boy and a girl had done what no leader ever dared.

In time all that people took Little Bear to lead them, and Singing Wind stood beside him in all that he did, and they lived many years in joy.

And in days long after, when they both slept with God, the people still remembered the tale of their deeds, till at last they are told here today.