

Waking Rose

A Fairy Tale Retold

"Once upon a time..."
-- Grimm

Hers

I love him more than poetry. I love him more than song.

It sounded promising, like the beginning of a ballad that would soar up into the crazy blue sky. Rose sighed, opening her eyes and running her fingers through her red hair, letting it float back down onto the pillow. It did sound terribly romantic.

"The only problem," she said to herself as she rolled over in bed, "is that the man I love is the most unromantic creature who ever opened a book."

She couldn't picture anyone falling madly in love with such a person as Fish. What a name, Fish. His real name was Benedict Denniston. Fish: think cold, slippery, detached. Benedict: think dry scholarly monk from the Dark Ages. Denniston: think English preparatory school, stolid country squire. Nothing about his name sounded the least bit romantic.

And he wasn't really handsome, not in any conventional sense of the term. He was of average height and build, with unruly brown hair. His typical expression suggested petulance. There was nothing readily apparent about him that should attract her.

"This is why mathematics alone doesn't explain the world," Rose said aloud. Because when she added up all these negative characteristics, somehow the sum was a person who was irresistibly attractive to Rose Brier.

She would see him today, she thought to herself. Today was her sister's wedding and he was coming, to be the best man.

The mere thought was enough to impel her out of bed with a bounce and over to the closet, humming a passionate love song.

But she heaved a sigh as she opened the rickety closet door and surveyed the clothes inside. The problem was, she wasn't his love. At least, not yet.

"What is wrong with me?" she moaned, pulling a shirt off of a hanger. "There are billions of men in the world, at least millions who are near my age. Maybe hundreds who are compatible with me. Maybe at least a dozen who would want to date me. There's got to be at least five on the continent whom I could probably marry. So why in the world am I so hung up about this one guy? And he doesn't even like you, Rose Brier."

The lecture had as little effect on her as it usually did. She ran her fingers through her red hair again and stared at the ceiling of her bedroom. One of the rafters had a cobweb on it.

Well, at least she and Mom and Blanche were back in the country in Warwick, at the old farmhouse that used to be their home, before Dad died of cancer years ago. And Blanche was getting married. And she, Rose, would be the maid of honor.

The wedding! There was so much to do today! She was out of the room like a shot.

HIS

He woke up in the unfamiliar bed, blinking in the bright sunlight. The relative silence around him reminded him that he was in the country, in the home of the Brier's friends, the Wykas. Yawning, he got out of bed and found the bathroom to start getting ready.

Shaving for Fish was a meticulous process. As he carefully moved the razor over the slightly raised scar on his cheek, he thought again of his dad's insistence that he have plastic surgery done to erase the effects of his various run-ins with criminals. But Bear always said, "Scars are cool." Fish admitted that substantial parts of his history were now written on his flesh—one cut on his cheek running down to his chin was from a fight in prison. That one had actually healed the worst—it hadn't been properly treated at the time. Because of it, he noticed, his smile was slightly crooked. There were one or two faint scars from a few other fights he'd encountered on the streets. One from a man who had been more heavy-handed than effective. Another from a slap on the side of the face with a pistol.

And one mark that ran down from between his eyebrows under his right eye—barely noticeable but he could make it out. That lovely jag had been courtesy of a Mr. Freet, from a blow with the butt end of a whip. Fish felt it lightly with his fingertips, amazed at how something that had hurt so much at the time was now hardly noticeable. He wondered idly if plastic surgery would have erased that one. But most of the scars from that unpleasant episode were not visible.

He sighed, gave himself one more quick glance, then splashed water on his face quickly and combed gel into his light brown hair, which tended to get out of hand without some help. Then he set about getting dressed.

Once presentable, he walked down the steps to the kitchen. "Good morning, Mrs. Wyka," he said courteously.

"Good morning to you, Fish," the woman beamed. "Do you like omelets? I just made your brother one."

"Sounds great," Fish said amiably. He had to smile. Most of the time he and his brother introduced themselves to strangers by their Christian names—Benedict and Arthur. But to the Brier family, they had always been Fish and Bear, right from the start, so naturally that's how the Briers had introduced them to all their friends, including the Wykas.

They probably think our parents were hippies, Fish speculated. Few knew or recalled that "Fish" and "Bear" were handles from when the brothers had been in juvenile prison. Blanche Brier—now Bear's fiancé—had always liked the name Bear, and even when she found out Bear's real name, she and her mother, Jean, and sister, Rose, had continued to use it. It certainly fit Bear, who was tall and burly, with thick dark hair that was inclined to be shaggy.

Fish actually preferred to be known by his real name, Benedict, or Ben, but the Briers had never asked him what he had preferred, and so to them, he remained Fish. He had acquired that name because, according to his former inmates, he was so good at getting out of tight places, which was true, and partly because of his aloof, detached demeanor. It was correct that Fish was a fairly calm, analytical person. But he didn't know exactly why others seemed to think he had no feelings. He supposed he must be better at hiding his responses than most people, and wondered if that were truly an asset, outside of dealing with policemen and criminals.

He was eating his omelet with the careful table manners his mother had drilled into him when Steven came in, stretching and yawning.

"Morning, Steve," Fish said.

"Hey, Ben, good morning," Steve clasped his former high school buddy's hand. "So where's the groom?"

"Probably out for a morning walk," Fish said.

"Hope he's back before we have to leave for the church," the tall black guy smiled.

"Oh, I'm sure he will be," Fish took the last bite. "You know Bear."

"Yeah, I guessed he was pretty much gone for Blanche ever since he snagged my tux to take her to the prom. And ruined it in a fistfight," Steven laughed. "So how do I get an omelet?"

Fish indicated the other room with a finger. "Mrs. Wyka makes them. Why don't you go say good morning to her? I bet she'll make you one as good as this one."

"Hey, I'll be Prince Charming to anyone for an omelet. It's sure nice of these people to put us strangers up for the wedding."

“The Briers have some good friends around here,” Fish agreed. “Bear’s trying to buy a house in this town so he and Blanche can live near her mom.”

“I can see why,” Steven nodded. He stepped into the other room and smiled broadly. “Good morning, Mrs. Wyka!”

Fish chuckled to himself as he overheard the friendly conversation that ensued in the next room. Setting his plate on the counter by the sink, he went back upstairs to change into his wedding clothes. Once dressed, he dialed the Brier’s number on his cell.

The phone rang several times before someone answered, and the line opened onto chaos.

“Hello?” shouted the female voice over a background of chattering and calls for assistance.

“Hello, this is Ben Denniston,” Fish said. “Is Jean available?”

“Fish!” the voice exclaimed and Fish realized it was Rose. “You sounded so suave I didn’t recognize you.”

“Good morning,” he said blandly. “It’s the voice I use for speaking to ladies of more mature years.”

“You mean Mom? I’ll get her. Mom!” Rose sang out without moving the phone from her lips and Fish winced.

“I think she’s talking with a delivery man,” Rose informed him.

“Can she use any help?”

“Oh definitely. All sorts of friends-and-relations are over here helping but they’re all women. There are a few things I know she needs a guy to do. Could you and Steven come over and take things to the hall?”

“Of course,” Fish said good-humoredly. “Tell your mom we’ll be right over.”

As he and Steven were walking out the door, they spotted Bear coming over a far hillside. He waved at them and bounded down the hill to meet them.

“Great morning!” he shouted as he came closer.

“So is the bridegroom ready?” Fish asked, noting his brother’s exuberance.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Bear’s grin was contagious. “I’d better get to the church.”

“You want us to come with you?” Steven asked, checking his watch.

“Nah—Blanche and I agreed to make sure we both had some alone time today before everything gets into motion. Want to make sure we’re prepared.”

“Father Raymond would approve,” Fish said.

Bear nodded. “Probably gave us the idea himself from heaven.”

When Fish got to the Brier’s house, he and Steven met a flurry of girls, women, and babies, all dressed in various kinds of wedding finery, and all bustling about with distinct and sometimes contradictory purposes. Most of the wedding children—and there were quite a few flower girls and pages—were dressed or half-dressed and were running around outside on the lawn of the old farmhouse, or jumping off the porch steps, or swinging from the branches of the apple tree. Their mothers and older sisters were chasing them, reprimanding them, and trying to keep them somewhat polished. Fish noticed that most of the children and quite a few of the adults were of Asian descent. He recalled that he had been told the Briers were good friends with a large family whose mother was Vietnamese and supposed these were some relations of those.

He and Steven edged their way into the house and found Rose in jeans and an apron tying wildflowers into nosegays for the flower children to carry, Mrs. Foster, Steven’s mom, poring over a list of guests, and Jean Brier in her best cream dress talking on the phone to a relative who appeared to be hard of hearing. There was no sign of the bride.

“Where’s Blanche?” Fish asked Rose over the tumult after waving hello to Mrs. Foster.

“Upstairs in her room.”

“Getting ready?”

“She was ready,” Rose informed him, tossing back her hair “at seven a.m. this morning. But she told me she wasn’t doing anything today except getting dressed and marrying Bear. She said

to me, ‘That’s it. If there’s any crisis about the flowers or the catering or the place settings, I don’t want to know about it, so don’t tell me. It will all work out.’”

“She’s probably right,” Fish observed, watching the minor hysterics of one twelve-year-old and her younger brother on the porch. The boy had gotten a streak of mud down the front of his page-boy outfit.

Rose finished tying the ribbons with a flourish and indicated the table, stacked with programs, flower arrangements, and covered dishes. “Mother wants everything on the table brought over to the hall before we go to church. Can you princes spirit them over there and still make it to the church on time?”

“On my flying carpet,” Steven assured her, hefting up a large box of napkins and vases of flowers.

“Wonderful. I have to get dressed,” Rose sighed, running her fingers through her tangled hair.

“Oh? You’re not wearing that flannel shirt?” Fish sounded disappointed.

Rose made a face at him. “You look very handsome this morning, Fish.”

He bowed again. “No doubt I’ll be able to return the compliment later.”

“Yes, later. I’m just Cinderella now. At least the bride is stunning.”

As Steven and Fish packed the boxes in the car, Steve surprised Fish by asking him, “So what’s going on between you and Rose?”

Fish was slightly annoyed. “Nothing.”

“Really? That’s a surprise. I thought for sure she liked you.”

“You asked if there was anything *between* us. I thought you meant reciprocal affection,” Fish answered dryly, starting the engine.

“Eh. So she likes you but you don’t like her? She’s a cute kid.”

“Exactly,” said Fish, inching the car down the driveway in reverse, watching the rear window carefully. Having so many children running around made him cautious.

“So what’s keeping you from dating her?”

Fish glanced at Steven, amused. “Why don’t you date her yourself if you’re so interested?”

“Oh, I don’t want to intrude on the family,” Steven said lightly. “After all, your brother is marrying her sister. It seems too perfect a scenario. I just can’t figure out what’s stopping you from pursuing her.”

Fish wasn’t inclined to go into the matter, even with an old high school friend. “You said it yourself,” Fish said. “She’s a cute kid.”

Hers

It was a beautiful day. Rose, whose many duties as maid of honor had included praying for good weather on May 25, gave thanks to God that she could check one more thing off her list, as she looked out the bedroom window. The sky was a pale robin’s egg blue, with only a few tufts of cloud in the sky.

The wedding children and bridesmaids were piling into family cars and driving over to the church. Only she and Mom and Blanche had yet to leave.

Blanche was uncertain, as usual, about how she came off as a bride, but Rose had taken one look at her in the white linen-and-silk gown and pronounced that she had turned into a princess for real, this time. Blanche had flushed pink and checked the mirror again.

Her gown was beautiful—simple yet sumptuous, as a proper wedding gown should be, Rose thought. It was pure white, with a textured sheen to the material—a simple bodice, a curved neck that showed off Blanche’s lithe neck, simple elbow-length sleeves, a full skirt embroidered in a few places with the delicate shapes of flowers and leaves. No heavy beaded lace, no exaggerated

flounces, no plunging necklines, no drippy pearls. Just a lovely, simple dress that didn't compete with the bride's natural grace.

Blanche's black hair was pulled up into a soft chignon, not one black strand out of place. It glistened softly in the morning light, and her fair skin had a radiant glow. Silver filigree earrings and a silver cross were her only jewelry. Her veil cascaded down her back in translucent white folds.

"You are perfect," Rose declared. "There's nothing you can do to make yourself look prettier—most of it you're not responsible for anyhow."

Blanche smiled self-consciously. "Do you think I should wear any lipstick?"

"No. But it probably wouldn't hurt if you feel you want some on. Do you need anything else?"

"I'm good," Blanche picked through an open cosmetic case. "Go ahead downstairs. I'll come soon."

"As you wish." Rose tucked her silk pouch of a purse and her bridesmaid's bouquet of wildflowers into a basket, and stole out to the porch for a few quiet moments to just sit and feel utterly beautiful.

Partly it was because of her dress. It was long, sweeping, and palest pink, lightly trimmed with silk roses and trailing ribbons. Sitting on the steps of the battered wooden porch, feeling the spring breeze play over her long red hair, she closed her eyes and felt as though she were part of a large, beautiful painting.

As she sat, she wondered if Bear was already at the church. Probably. He was a little anxious about whether or not he would be a good husband and father. Rose felt he shouldn't be worried. He and Blanche had been dating for two years, and it was obvious to everyone that they were perfect for each other. Still Bear was concerned: his parents hadn't had a good marriage. "But at least he knows his handicaps and can deal with them," Rose assured herself. Her gut instinct was that Bear would be a terrific husband and father. She knew Blanche thought so too—obviously.

Probably Fish was at the church too. There was the usual faint flutter in her stomach regarding that personage. He had looked so—regal this morning in his tuxedo. She wondered to herself why she was still so fascinated with Bear's younger brother after all this time.

How long had she known him now? Almost three years. Her family had come to know Bear first, back when the brothers were poor and living on the streets and the Foster's living room couch. She had only met Fish, through various circumstances, a few months afterwards. "Then I rescued him," she thought to herself, still with a touch of awe. He'd been kidnapped, and she'd stumbled into the criminal's lair, and found him. One would think that rescuing someone from Certain Death would cause some romantic feelings—he had rescued her, too, before that unusual episode was over—but apparently, the only thing it had done was make Fish perennially concerned for her safety and not the least bit interested in anything beyond it.

She sighed heavily. While Blanche and Bear had soon discovered their mutual attraction, she and Fish had always remained careful friends, Rose's daydreams notwithstanding.

He seemed much older than she was, even though he was only twenty-one, and she was nineteen. He was extremely intelligent, and most of the time they'd known each other, he'd been at school, engrossed in catching up on his delayed education. He was also wealthy, but since his experience of prison and poverty had shaped his living habits, it was only rarely that Rose remembered that he actually had quite a lot of money.

Their conversations alternated between intellectual discussion and his tormenting her with his superior intellect. Despite this, she'd had a fabulous crush on him. For a long time after she met him, she had written down almost everything he said to her in her diary. Every occasional letter he sent her she still filed carefully in a fabric-covered wish box under her bed. She'd even printed out his emails. Usually she sent him six-page letters and he wrote her back a meager page, but at least he wrote. Once, he'd been in a mood, and had drawn a fish at the bottom of his letter instead of signing his name.

She'd cut out the fish and taped it on her bulletin board over her desk. Once she'd toyed with the idea of putting it in her locket, but that seemed a bit ridiculous, even to Rose.

Trying hard not to anticipate seeing him today—and what would he think of how she looked in her bridesmaid's dress? —she rose to her feet, dusting off the barest fragments of dust from that lovely skirt.

“Blanche?” she called. “It really, really is time to go.”

HIS

The Brier's parish was a simple country church that had gone through far too many renovations to make it more modern, with painful results. The abstract art banners around the altar were appalling, even though their colors were no doubt liturgically correct. Fish speculated what the church had looked like a hundred years ago when it was first built, and wondered why the artistic choices of those ancestors hadn't been respected, or at least investigated.

He tried to ignore the surroundings as he sat in the pew next to his older brother, waiting, along with the congregation of friends and family—mostly Brier friends and family—for the celebration to begin. He had glanced over his shoulder at that brightly dressed throng once or twice. There were senior citizens from the Blanche's New York parish and waitresses from the banquet hall where Blanche had worked. The home schooling crowd of Warwick, New Jersey, was also present in numbers. It was true in this case, Fish thought wryly, that the congregation was more artistically appealing than the church building.

Eventually there were soft chords of organ music, announcing that the bridal party was arriving. Fish looked at Bear, but his older brother had already risen and was moving to the front of the church where he would meet his bride. Fish and the other groomsmen followed him.

He was amazed at how many people were in the wedding party. The procession of priests and altar servers at the beginning was lengthy—Blanche was friends with an order of friars and they had all come to the wedding. He counted at least seven men in religious garb in addition to other priests, mostly fairly old or fairly young. There were four altar servers of various sizes, all Vietnamese. And then the bridal party began with a flock of little girls and boys in white, carrying flowers and candles. The older ones walked with a slow practiced pace, while the little ones bounced along behind them, trying hard to resist the urge to push and shove the slow ones in front.

Then came bridesmaids, all young girls dressed in pink gowns. The last of them must have been Rose, but Fish didn't recognize her at first. She had undergone a complete transformation from the wild-haired girl of this morning. Her hair was up in the front and fell in a cascade of curls down the back. She moved so slowly and so regally that she seemed like a different person, serene and composed. Then she caught Fish's eye with an eager grin. He raised an eyebrow at her.

It was her sister, following in a cloud of silk veiling, who exuded an air of true tranquility and poise. Blanche, he admitted to himself, was gorgeous, and on this day she shone with a real radiance. Her black hair and fair skin contrasted each other in harmonious balance, and there was barely a trace of timidity about her as she came down the aisle, unescorted and alone.

Mr. Brier had died several years ago, and Fish and Bear's father, whom Blanche had become close to in a short period of time, had just died. Her mother Jean, had considered walking up with her, but in the wake of Mr. Denniston's recent death, Blanche decided to honor the memories of these two fathers by walking with them in spirit. It was significant, and painful, that as a bride she walked alone.

But now Bear was coming forward to take her arm—a bit early, but it seemed fitting—and led her up to the altar, where a gray-bearded Franciscan priest with a gruff face stood blinking

and smiling despite himself. Bear lifted Blanche's veil and embraced her. Rose burst into tears, and some in the congregation applauded.

Fish looked at the embracing couple, and noted, on some level, how detached he felt from the whole scene. He knew that logically, he should be joining in the sentimental swell of emotion, or even feeling the sadness of missing those who were not physically present, like his parents, and Father Raymond—instead, he felt nothing. Shouldn't he be feeling *something* at his brother's wedding? Why did he sense only a dull blunted emptiness?

You know why. Because this will never be you.

Quietly he picked up a missal and pushed the thoughts away.