

Family Enchantment

A Fairy Tale

By Mary Warner

Once, in a time and place not far from here, there was a family suffering from an enchantment. The family, composed of Mama, Papa, three sons, Mama's mama, and Mama's uncle, did not know the origin of the enchantment. According to legend, the enchantment had been placed on the family long ago, back to a time when the ancestors of the family could no longer be traced.

Mama's uncle knew the most about the enchantment. He was older than his sister, Mama's mama; so much older that Mama's mama had never heard any recollection of his birth. He was called Wise Uncle because of the mystery of his age and vast knowledge of the enchantment.

Wise Uncle said that he, of the entire family, had escaped the enchantment. Everyone else suffered to a greater or lesser degree. When asked about the specific manifestations of the enchantment, Wise Uncle gave vague answers. He said that because he was the only one not enchanted, he had been given the power to recognize and subdue the enchantment. In order to conquer the enchantment, he could not reveal all the traits that each family member possessed.

His status as unenchanted meant that only he could diagnose the enchantment's severity upon each family member, which he did at the birth of every child into the family and at the marriage of every spouse into the family. According to Wise Uncle, the enchantment could be transmitted from a blood family member to a spouse. Thus far, he claimed that Mama, Papa, and their three sons had escaped the worst of the enchantment. His sister, Mama's mama, had also been fortunate to be afflicted with only a minor form of the enchantment, a portion of which appeared as a star-shaped birthmark near her left eye.

Wise Uncle warned that the family's luck could not hold forever. Soon, someone would be born into the family who would fall under the severest form of the enchantment.

Wise Uncle was right. Mama became pregnant with her fourth child. Upon the baby's arrival, Wise Uncle was consulted. He examined the girl as she lay upon Mama's stomach. The wrinkled and bluish-yellow baby stared into Wise Uncle's eyes and issued a challenge. Wise Uncle's glare returned the challenge. The baby's eyes did not waver. From this, Wise Uncle knew that the baby was enchanted, but he could also see that the child had a face of great beauty and softness. Mama and Papa would never believe this girl was enchanted unless he found another sign.

As he searched the child, he discovered not one, but two signs. Each of the baby's feet had an extra toe. In addition, Wise Uncle noted a tiny, pink, amoeba-like birthmark on the bridge of the baby's nose. The mark was so small that it had almost escaped his notice.

Mama and Papa waited anxiously for Wise Uncle's pronouncement. When he told them that their baby girl was enchanted to a horrifying degree, they wailed. How could this girl, with the sweet countenance of dew on flower petals, be enchanted? Papa wrung his hands and ground his teeth. What could they do?

Mama cradled the baby and cried. Her tears fell in orbs that splashed upon the baby's forehead and slid until they reached her birthmark. Mama's and Papa's sobs evaporated as they watched the tears cause the birthmark to redden and grow. Their sadness turned to fear. They had never seen such a thing and looked to Wise Uncle for answers.

Wise Uncle took the baby from Mama. He said, "If there is to be any chance of this child surviving, I must be allowed to raise her as I see fit. She will never completely overcome the enchantment, but, with my guidance, I may be able to subdue it enough for her to lead a normal existence." And, with that, he whisked the girl away to his room.

Mama, Papa and the three boys did not see the baby for a year. They rarely saw Wise Uncle, either, as he spent most of his time with the child. Only Mama's mama was allowed to visit and watch the girl when Wise Uncle needed to leave his room for the special tinctures and equipment he used on the enchantment.

Upon the baby's first birthday, Wise Uncle thought that the enchantment had been suppressed enough for the child to be reintroduced to the rest of the family. He brought her forth and announced, "This is Yargloeg."

Yargloeg? What sort of name was that? Wise Uncle explained that he had chosen an ugly name for the girl so she would understand that she was held captive by the enchantment. Other than the birthmark, which was larger and redder, the baby had grown more beautiful within the year. Wise Uncle said, "Her physical beauty may allow her to forget the enchantment, but the ugliness of her name will be a constant reminder."

Yargloeg was given her own room, which was built to Wise Uncle's specifications. It was no wider than the span of his arms, no longer than twice his height, and no higher than the height of his fingertips with his hands stretched over his head. A single, uncurtained window, twelve inches square, provided the only light. The window, which was placed high on the wall, was periodically opened by Wise Uncle so that the foul vapors of the enchantment could be released. A mattress on the floor served as Yargloeg's bed and was the only furniture in the room. Wise Uncle did not dare give Yargloeg a raised bed because, as he told the family, she might fall off of it as a toddler. There was another, more compelling reason, however. As Yargloeg grew, she might take to hiding under it. Hiding spaces allowed the enchantment to ferment and expand.

For years, Yargloeg's days followed a pattern which blurred to infinity in her mind. She was awakened by Wise Uncle every morning so that he could perform various ministrations upon the enchantment. He pierced the perimeter of her birthmark with blue-hot pins in an effort to shrink it. If Yargloeg had had access to a mirror, she would have realized that this searing procedure was not helping. It only made the mark an angry scarlet.

Wise Uncle then moved to her extra toes. As the mood struck, he might tie string around them and yank fast and hard. The string was often wound so tightly that her toes turned purple. Sometimes, Wise Uncle used the birthmark pins on her toes. And then there were the pliers. If Wise Uncle thought the other treatments weren't strong enough, he'd squeeze and pull with

pliers until her toes bled. Yargloeg thought perhaps that Wise Uncle wanted to remove her extra toes, but after each procedure, he tenderly applied salve and bandaged them.

Yargloeg's body and orifices were then variously poked, pinched and prodded by Wise Uncle in an attempt to drive the enchantment from her. Through all of Wise Uncle's procedures, Yargloeg stayed silent. She remembered Wise Uncle suffocating her screams with a cloth when she was younger. He had told her that screaming would only strengthen the enchantment.

After Wise Uncle had finished, Yargloeg dressed and waited in her room until Mama's mama brought her breakfast. Mama's mama visited Yargloeg three times a day, once for every meal. When she came, she sang and talked and read to Yargloeg. If it hadn't been for Mama's mama, Yargloeg might never have learned to speak. Wise Uncle had forbidden everyone in the family from talking to her unless they insulted her or gave her an order. Her brothers delighted in doing both because their parents never allowed them to insult or boss each other around. Yargloeg's parents didn't correct her brothers because they were frightened by the enchantment. However, rather than insult their daughter, they chose silence in her presence. Yargloeg didn't learn until much later that Mama's mama had argued with Wise Uncle in order to convince him that a mute child could not communicate the effects of the enchantment.

When Yargloeg was done with breakfast, she was allowed out of her room for a few hours. She spent this time doing household chores; sweeping and scrubbing floors, dusting, washing dishes and laundry, cleaning the bathroom and completing whatever task she was commanded to do. Yargloeg worked without complaint. She was determined to do whatever was necessary to overcome the enchantment and thought that if she remained good-natured, the enchantment would eventually go away.

After chore time, Yargloeg spent much of the rest of her days alone in her room, except for mealtimes with Mama's mama. If Wise Uncle was feeling that the enchantment was especially intractable, he might enter Yargloeg's room in the evening for another round of treatments. Thus, she spent a decade of her life and, as she grew, other signs of enchantment surfaced. Yargloeg's back became hunched and she averted her eyes from the eyes of others. She rarely spoke and when she did, words sighed out of her mouth.

By the time Yargloeg was twelve-years-old, she had become a ghost-child. As she was never allowed outside, no one else knew of her existence, and her family, other than Wise Uncle and Mama's mama, paid her little heed.

Yargloeg might have died an early death in this ghost-child state, but for an unexpected visit part-way through her twelfth year. It was spring and she was lying on her bed after chore time. She heard a rap-tap-tap on her window sill and looked toward it. There, with its purply-blue iridescent head, sat a grackle, which was looking curiously at her with its head cocked. The two stared at each other for some time. Then, the grackle cackled and flapped away.

The grackle returned and repeated its routine for many days. At first, Yargloeg observed the bird without moving or making a sound. After a month's worth of daily visits, she found that she

could stand under the closed window and watch the bird without scaring it. The grackle liked to strut on the sill. It peered back at her.

As the grackle grew accustomed to Yargloeg, it increased its vocalizations. Sometimes, it sounded to Yargloeg like the grackle was talking to her, but it was difficult to make out the words through the closed window. If only she could open the window, maybe she could hear what it was saying, but she couldn't reach the latch. She thought about asking Wise Uncle to open the window for her, but she knew that he kept his own schedule concerning her treatments and he'd never agree to it. She tried asking Mama's mama at supper one evening, but she said, "No. That's Wise Uncle's business. He knows more about subduing enchantments than I do."

Yargloeg pondered her predicament and found a solution. If she rolled up her mattress and put it under the window, she could get hold of the latch and open it. After lunch and chores one day, she did just that. Soon, the grackle came for its visit. It bobbed its head forward and back, saw that the window was open, and walked through to the inner sill. It burred, "Wise Uncle not wise."

Yargloeg was so startled by this statement that she didn't even try to whisper, "What?" in response. Her volume had no effect on the bird.

"Wise Uncle not wise, Wise Uncle not wise," said the grackle.

As Yargloeg puzzled over this, the grackle turned, went to the edge of the outer sill and flew away.

How could Wise Uncle not be wise? wondered Yargloeg. *What could this mean?* Her family hung on his every word and asked him for advice on all matters. They always did as he directed. They all said he was wise and wise was part of his name. It didn't make any sense to Yargloeg, however, she was glad of the bird's company and continued to encourage it to visit by opening the window. She discovered that she could leave the window unlatched and cracked open ever so slightly and the bird could get in without her help.

Often the grackle perched on the inner sill and sat with Yargloeg while she talked to it. The bird was a good listener. It didn't speak much, but when it did, it made pronouncements, always in triplicate. It had said, "Family sleepwalking" and "Mama's mama good help" and "Yargloeg pretty inside." Yargloeg could never quite figure out the pronouncements, but she repeated them to herself so she wouldn't forget them. The girl and the bird learned to trust each other so deeply that the grackle eventually perched on Yargloeg's shoulder or finger and allowed her to smooth its feathers.

Meanwhile, Wise Uncle noticed changes in Yargloeg that made him pause. Over the months of the grackle's visits, Yargloeg was losing the ghost-girl quality that he had instilled. There was a sparkle in her eyes where dullness used to reside. Her graying skin was freshening with pink and her back seemed less humped. She started vocalizing pain she felt during his treatments, quietly at first, but louder as the days progressed. Wise Uncle knew nothing of the grackle's visits because the grackle sensed Wise Uncle's schedule and left in time for Yargloeg to unroll and

make her bed and close the window. Yargloeg did not tell Wise Uncle about the grackle. She was afraid he would permanently lock the window so the bird could no longer visit her.

Wise Uncle was determined to figure out what was behind Yargloeg's transformation. He warned the family that the enchantment was getting worse in the girl. She was no longer allowed out of her room and Mama's mama was ordered to stop talking to her. Wise Uncle brought Yargloeg her meals and added extra treatment sessions to her day. When she cried out, he tied her hands and gagged her. He refused to bandage her pinched toes and left pins around her birthmark until blood ran into her eyes.

During the days of Wise Uncle's frenzied attempts at conquering the enchantment, the grackle sat with Yargloeg after her treatments and comforted her with a soft, throaty gurgle.

For all the extra treatments, Yargloeg seemed strangely calmer and more formidable when Wise Uncle returned. He spat and cursed at the girl in frustration. He would crush this enchantment if it was the last thing he did.

Wise Uncle decided he could not leave Yargloeg alone, even for a moment. He would sleep in Yargloeg's room and arrange for Mama's mama to leave meals at the door. When Yargloeg heard this, she immediately understood the grackle's first pronouncement. Wise Uncle certainly wasn't wise. There was no way he could constantly stay with Yargloeg. Eventually, he would have to use the bathroom, which was down the hall from her room, among the sleeping quarters of the house.

Sure enough, midway through the day that Wise Uncle put his plan into place, he felt the urge to go. He tried to ignore his need, but it became impossible. *What could happen in the few minutes it takes?* Wise Uncle thought. He raced out the door.

While he was gone, the grackle flapped to the outer sill, nudged the window open with its beak and floated gently to Yargloeg's shoulder.

The grackle was once again ready to take its role of solace when Wise Uncle slammed his fists into the door, banging it against the wall. Yargloeg and the grackle froze. Wise Uncle lunged for the bird, which thawed and swirled about the low room. As Wise Uncle attempted to snatch the grackle, Mama, Papa, and their sons appeared in Yargloeg's doorway. "What's happening?" they asked, blinking their wide eyes slowly.

Wise Uncle caught hold of the bird and raised his arm to dash it to the ground. He yelled, "Yargloeg is evil! Her enchantment is so powerful that she makes friends with the blackest of birds!"

Mama's mama shoved her way into the room and swatted full force on Wise Uncle's head with a broom. He dropped the grackle, which landed with a stunned thud on the floor. As Wise Uncle rubbed his head, he grabbed for the bird again.

Yargloeg stepped on his arm, straightened her back until she achieved her full height, and made a few pronouncements of her own. “Don’t you dare touch that bird! He is my friend and has treated me with more kindness than you have ever shown in your whole life! If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you are the enchanted one, not I!”

Wise Uncle stared at Yargloeg. He saw the same challenge in Yargloeg’s eyes that he had seen at her birth and turned away in fright. He curled in upon himself. Then, his body sizzled and fizzled until he disappeared into a cloud of smoke. His clothing smoldered on the floor. The grackle roused itself and picked through the layers of fabric until it came upon a sickly gray and white grub worm, the remains of Wise Uncle. The bird gulped down the worm and flew back to Yargloeg’s shoulder, where it whispered, “Yargloeg pretty inside.”

Yargloeg faced her family members, who appeared to have snapped out of a dream. In a way, they had. Yargloeg’s pronouncements were correct. Wise Uncle was enchanted, not she. This realization allowed her to break the centuries-old enchantment that kept Mama, Papa, and the three boys from seeing Wise Uncle for who he really was. Somehow, she understood that Mama’s mama was never completely under Wise Uncle’s control, and, in a flash, felt that it was their birthmarks that had protected them. She wondered if her extra toes had also helped.

As her family stood gazing back at her, Yargloeg’s birthmark bloomed into the shape of a lily, which became her name ever after. And the grackle whispered, “Lily pretty inside.”

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