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Summer Wind  
by Nancy Kress  
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First published in Ruby Slippers, Golden Tears, editors Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, Avon, 1995

Fictionwise Contemporary  
Fantasy

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Sometimes she talked to them. Which of course was stupid, since they could neither hear nor answer. She talked anyway. It made the illusion of company.

Her favorite to talk to was the stableboy, frozen in the stableyard beside the king's big roan, the grooming brush still in his upraised hand. The roan was frozen too, of course, brown eyes closed, white forelock blowing gently in the summer wind. She used to be a little frightened of the roan, so big it was, but not of the stableboy, who had had merry red lips and wide shoulders and dark curling hair.

He had them still.

Every so often she washed off a few of them: the stableboy, or the cook beside his pots, or the lady-in-waiting sewing in the solarium, or even the man and woman in the north bedchamber, locked in naked embrace on the wide bed. None of them ever sweated or stank, but still, there was the dust -- dust didn't sleep -- and after years and years the people became coated in fine, gray powder. At first she tried to whisk them clean with a serving maid's feather duster, but it was very hard to dust eyelashes and earlobes. In the end she just threw a pot of water over them. They didn't stir, and their clothes dried eventually, the velvets and silks a little stiff and water-marked, the coarse-weaved breeches and skirts of the servants none the worse off. Better, maybe. And it wasn't as if any of them would catch cold.

"There you are," she said to the stableboy. "Now, doesn't that feel better? To be clean?"

Water glistened in his black curls.

"I'm sure it must feel better."

A droplet fell onto his forehead, slid over his smooth brown cheeks, came to rest in the corner of his mouth.

"It was not supposed to happen this way, Corwin."

He didn't answer, of course. She reached out one finger and patted the droplet from his sleeping lips. She put the finger in her own mouth and sucked it.

"How many years was I asleep? How many?"

His chest rose and fell gently, regularly.

She wished she could remember the color of his eyes.

\* \* \* \*

A few years later, the first prince came. Or maybe it wasn't even the first. Briar Rose was climbing the steps from the cool, dark chambers under the

castle, her spread skirt full of wheat and apples and cheese as fresh as the day they were stored. She passed the open windows of the Long Gallery and heard a tremendous commotion.

Finally! At last!

She dropped her skirts; wheat and apples rolled everywhere. Rose rushed through the Gallery and up the steps to her bedchamber in the highest tower. From her stone window she could just glimpse him beyond the castle wall, the moat, the circle of grass between moat and Hedge. He sat astride a white stallion on the far side of the Hedge, hacking with a long silver sword. Sunlight glinted on his blond hair.

She put her hand to her mouth. The slim white fingers trembled.

The prince was shouting, but wind carried his words away from her. Did that mean the wind would carry hers toward him? She waved her arms and shouted.

"Here! Oh, brave prince, here I am! Briar Rose, princess of all the realm! Fight on, oh good prince!"

He didn't look up. With a tremendous blow, he hacked a limb from the black Hedge, so thick and interwoven it looked like metal, not plant. The branch shuddered and fell. On the backswing, the sword struck smaller branches to the prince's right. They whipped aside and then snapped back, and a thorn-studded twig slapped the prince across the eyes and blinded him. He screamed and dropped his sword. The sharp blade caught the stallion in the right leg. It shied in pain. The blinded prince fell off, directly into the Hedge, and was impaled on thorns as long as a man's hand and hard as iron.

Rose screamed. She rushed down the tower steps, not seeing them, not seeing anything. Over the drawbridge, across the grass. At the Hedge she was forced to stop by the terrible thorns, as thick and sharp on this side as on the other. She couldn't see the prince, but she could hear him. He went on screaming for what seemed an eternity, although of course it wasn't.

Then he stopped.

She sank onto the green grass, sweet with unchanging summer, and buried her face in her apple-smelling skirts. Somewhere, faintly on the wind, she heard a sound like old women weeping.

\* \* \* \*

After that, she avoided all the east-facing windows. It was years before she convinced herself that the prince's body was, must be, gone from the far side of the Hedge. Even though the carrion birds did not stay for nearly that long.

Somewhere around the thirteenth year of unchanging summer, the second prince came. Rose almost didn't hear him. For months, she had rarely left her tower chamber. Blankets draped the two stone windows, darkening the room almost to blackness. She descended the stone steps only to visit the storage rooms. The rest of the long hours, she lay on her bed and drank the wine stored deep in the cool cellars under the castle. Days and nights came and went, and she lifted the gold goblet to her lips and let the red forgetfulness slide down her throat and tried not to remember. Anything.

After the first unmemoried months of this, she caught sight of herself in her mirror. She found another blanket to drape over the treacherous glass.

But still the chamberpot must be emptied occasionally, although not very often. Rose shoved aside the blanket over the south window and leaned far out to dump the reeking pot into the moat far below. Her bleary eyes caught the flash of a sword.

He was red-headed this time, hair the color of warm flame. His horse was black, his sword set with green stones. Emeralds, perhaps. Or jade. Rose watched him, and not a muscle of her face moved.

The prince slashed at the Hedge, rising in his stirrups, swinging his mighty sword with both hands. The air rang with his blows. His bright hair swirled and leaped around his strong shoulders. Then his left leg caught on a thorn and the Hedge dragged him forward. The screaming started.

Rose let the edge of the blanket drop and stood behind it, the

unemptied chamber pot splashing over her trembling hands. She thought she heard sobs, the dry juiceless sobs of the very old, but of course the chamber was empty.

\* \* \* \*

She lost a year. Or maybe more than a year; she couldn't be sure. There was only the accumulation of dust to go by, thick on the Gallery floor, thick on the sleeping bodies. A year's worth of drifting dust.

When she came again to herself, she lay outside, on the endlessly green summer grass. Her naked body was covered with scars. She walked, dazed, through the castle. Clothes on the sleepers had been slashed to ribbons. Mutilated doublets, breeches, sleeves, redingotes, kirtles. Blood had oozed from exposed shoulders and thighs where the knife had cut too deep, blood now dried on the sleeping flesh. In the north bedchamber, the long tumbled hair of the woman had been hacked off, her exposed scalp clotted with blood, her lips still smiling as she slept in her lover's arms.

Rose stumbled, hand to her mouth, to the stableyard. Corwin sat beside the big roan, black curls unshorn, tunic unslashed. Beside him, ripped and bloody, lay Rose's own dress, the blue dress with pink forget-me-nots she had worn for the ball on her sixteenth birthday.

She buried it, along with all the other ruined clothing and the bloody rags from washing the clotted wounds, in a deep hole beside the Hedge.

On the wind, old women keened.

Although the spinning wheel was heavy, she dragged it down the tower stairs to the Long Gallery. For a moment she looked curiously at the sharp needle, but for only a moment. The storage rooms held wool and flax, bales of it, quintals of it. There were needles and thread and colored ribbon. There were wooden buttons, and jeweled buttons, and carved buttons of a translucent white said to be the teeth of far-away animals large enough to lay siege to a magic Hedge. Briar Rose knew better, but she took the white buttons and smoothed them between her fingers.

She weaved and sewed and embroidered new clothes for every sleeper in the castle, hundreds of people. Pages and scullery maids and mummers and knights and ladies and the chapel priest and the king's fool, for whom she made a parti-colored doublet embroidered with small sharp thorns. She weaved clothes for the chancellor and the pastry chef and the seneschal and the falconer and the captain of the guards and the king and queen, asleep on their thrones. For herself Rose weaved a simple black dress and wore it every day. Sometimes, tugging a chemise or kirtle or leggings over an unresisting sleeping body, she almost heard voices on the summer breeze. Voices, but no words.

She spun and weaved and embroidered sixteen hours a day, for years. She frowned as she worked, and a line stitched itself across her forehead, perpendicular to the lines in her neck. Her golden hair fell forward and interfered with the spinning and so she bound it into a plait, and saw the gray among the gold, and shoved the plait behind her back.

She had finished an embroidered doublet for a sous-cook and was about to carry it to the kitchen when she heard a great noise without the walls.

Slowly, with great care, Rose laid the sous-cook's doublet neatly on the polished Gallery floor. Slowly, leaning against the stone wall to ease her arthritic left knee, she climbed the circular stairwell to her bedchamber in the tower.

He attacked the Hedge from the northwest, and he had brought a great retinue. At least two dozen young men hacked and slashed, while squires and pages waited behind. Flags snapped in the wind; horses pawed the ground; a trumpet blared. Rose had no trouble distinguishing the prince. He wore a gold circlet in his glossy dark hair, and the bridle of his golden horse was set with black diamonds. His sword hacked and slashed faster than the others', and even from the high tower, Rose could see that he smiled.

She unfurled the banner she had embroidered, fierce yellow on black, with the two curt words: BE GONE! None of the young men looked up. Rose

flapped the banner, and a picture flashed through her mind, quick as the prince's sword: her old nurse, shaking a rug above the moat, freeing it of dust.

The prince and his men continued to hack at the Hedge. Rose called out -- after all, she could hear them, should they not be able to hear her? Her voice sounded thin, pale. She hadn't spoken in years. The ghostly words disappeared in the other voices, the wordless ones on the summer wind. No one noticed her.

The prince fell into the Hedge, and the screaming began, and Rose bowed her head and prayed for them, the lost souls, the ones for whom she would never spin doublets or breeches or whispered smiles like the one on the woman with hacked-off hair asleep in her shared bed in the north chamber.

Her other dead.

\* \* \* \*

After years, decades, everyone in the castle was clothed, and dusted, and pillowed on embroidered cushions rich with intricate designs in jewelled-colored thread. The pewter in the kitchen gleamed. The wooden floor of the Long Gallery shone. Tapestries hung bright and clean on the walls.

Rose no longer sat at the spinning wheel. Her fingers were knotted and twisted, the flesh between them thin and tough as snakeskin. Her hair, too, had thinned but not toughened, its lustrous silver fine as spun flax. When she brushed it at night, it fell around her sagging breasts like a shower of light.

Something was happening to the voices on the wind. They spun their wordless threads more strongly, more distinctly, especially outside the castle. Rose slept little now, and often she sat in the stableyard through the long unchanging summer afternoon, listening. Corwin slept beside her, his long lashes throwing shadows on his downy cheeks. She watched him, and listened to the spinning wind, and sometimes her lined face turned slowly in a day-long arc, as if following a different sun than the one that never moved.

"Corwin," she said in her quavery voice, "did you hear that?"

The wind hummed over the cobblestones, stirred the forelock of the sleeping roan.

"There are almost words, Corwin. No, better than words."

His chest rose and fell.

"I am old, Corwin. Too old. Princes are much younger men."

Sunlight tangled in his fresh black curls.

"They aren't really supposed to be words. Are they?"

Rose creaked to her feet. She walked to the stableyard well. The oak bucket swung suspended from its windlass, empty. Rose put a hand on the winch, which had become very hard for her twisted hands to turn, and closed her eyes. The wind spun past her, then through her. Her ears roared. The bucket descended of itself, filled with water. Cranked back up. Rose opened her eyes.

"Ah," she said quietly. And then, "So."

The wind blew.

She hobbled through the stableyard gate to the Hedge. One hand she laid on it, and closed her eyes. The wind hummed in her head, barely rustling the summer grass.

When she opened her eyes, nothing about the Hedge had changed.

"So," Rose said, and went back into the bailey, to dust the royal guard.

But each day she sat in the the wordless wind, or the wind whose words were not what mattered, or in her own mind. And listened.

\* \* \* \*

No prince had arrived for decades. A generation, Rose decided; a generation who knew the members of the retinue led by the young royal on the black horse. But that generation must grow older, and marry, and give birth to children, and one day a trumpet sounded and men shouted and banners snapped in the wind.

It took Rose a long time to climb the tower staircase. Often she

paused to rest, leaning against the cool stone, hand pressed to her heart. At the top she paused again, to look curiously around her old room, the one place she never cleaned. The bedclothes lay dirty and sodden on the stained floor. Rose picked them up, folded them across the bed, and hobbled to a stone window.

The prince had just begun to hack at the Hedge. He was the handsomest one yet: hair and beard of deep burnished bronze, dark blue doublet strained across strong shoulders, silver fittings on epaulets and sash. Rose's vision had actually improved with age; she could see his eyes. They were the green of stained-glass windows in bright sun.

She knew better, now, than to call to him. She stared at his hacking and slashing, at the deadly Hedge, and then closed her eyes. She let the wind roar in her ears, and through her head, and into the places that had not existed when she was young. Not even when she heard him scream did she open her eyes.

But finally, when the screams stopped as quickly as they had come, she leaned through the tower window and scanned the ground far below. The prince lay on the trampled grass, circled by kneeling, shouting men. Rose watched him wave them away, rise unsteadily, and remount his horse. She saw the horrified gaze he bent upon the Hedge.

Later, after they had all ridden away, she made her way back down the steps, over the drawbridge, across the grass to the Hedge. It loomed as dark, as thick, as impenetrable as ever. The black thorns pointed in all directions, in and out, and nothing she could do with the wind could change them at all.

\* \* \* \*

But then, one day, the Hedge melted.

Rose was very old. Her silver plait had become a bother and she'd cut it, trimming her hair into a neat white cap. There were ten hairs on her chin, which sometimes she remembered to pull out and sometimes she didn't. Her body had gone skinny as a bird's, with thin bird bones, except for a soft rounded belly that fluttered when she snored. The arthritis in her hands had eased and they, too, were skinny, long darting hands, worn and capable as a spinning shuttle. Her sunken blue eyes spun power.

She was sitting on the unchanging grass when she heard the tumult behind the Hedge. Creakily she rose to start for the tower. But there was no need. Before her eyes the black thorns melted, running into the ground like so much dirty water from washing the kitchen floor. And then the rest of the Hedge melted. Beside her a sleeping groom stirred, and beside the drawbridge, another.

The prince rode through the dissolving Hedge as if it had never been. He had brown hair, gold sash, a chestnut horse. As he dismounted, the solid mass of muscle in his thighs shifted above his high polished boots.

"The bedchamber of the princess -- where is it?"

Rose pointed at the highest tower.

He strode past her, trailed by his retinue. When the last squire had crossed the drawbridge, Rose followed.

All was commotion. Guards sprang forward, found themselves dressed in embroidered velvet, and spun around, bewildered, drawn swords in their hand. Ladies bellowed for pages. The falconer dashed from the mews, wearing a doublet of white satin slashed over crimson, the peregrine on his wrist fitted with gold-trimmed jesses with ivory bells.

Rose hobbled to the stableyard. The king's roan pawed and snorted. Men ran to and fro. A serving wench lowered the bucket into the well, on her head a coif sewn with gold lace.

Only Corwin noticed Rose. He stood a whole head taller than she -- surely it had only been a half head difference, once? He glanced at her, away, and then back again, puzzlement on his fresh, handsome face. His eyes, she saw, were gray.

"Do I know you, good dame?"

"No," Rose said.

"Did you come, then, with the visitors?"

"No, lad."

He studied her neat black dress, cropped hair, wrinkled face. Her eyes. "I thought I knew everyone who lived in the castle."

She didn't answer. A slow flush started in his smooth brown cheeks.

"Where do you live, mistress?"

She said, "I live nowhere you have ever been, lad. Nor could go." His puzzlement only deepened, but she turned and hobbled away. There was no way she could explain.

There was shouting now, in the high tower, drifted down on the warm summer air. Through the open windows of the Long Gallery, Rose saw the queen rush past, her long velvet skirts swept over her arm. A nearly bald woman in a lace nightdress rushed from the north bedchamber, screaming. Soon they would start to search, to ask questions, to close the drawbridge.

She hobbled over it, through the place where the Hedge had been, now a bare circle like a second, drier moat. And they were waiting for her just beyond, half concealed in a grove of trees, seven of them. Old women like her, power in their glances, voices like the spinning wind.

Rose said, "Is this all there is, then, for the life I have lost? This magic?"

"Yes," one of them said.

"It is no little thing," another said quietly. "You have brought a prince back to life. You have clothed a fiefdom. You have seen, as few do, what and who you are."

Rose thought about that. The woman who had spoken, her spine curved like a bow, gazed steadily back.

The first old woman repeated sharply, "It is no little thing you have gained, sister."

Rose said, "I would rather have had my lost life."

And to that there was no answer. The women shrugged, and linked arms with Rose, and the eight set out into the world that hardly, as yet, recognized how badly it needed them. And perhaps never would.

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