

The Spinster and the Clever Man

by Peg Robinson • art by Lars Leetaru

ONCE UPON A time, when the world was younger than it is now but older than it had been, there was a spinster who lived alone at the edge of a town and made her living by the spinning wheel. Day after day she took the rolls of wool, like dumplings piled in baskets, and spun them into yarn to sell to the weavers' guild. She worked long hours, for the spinning paid poorly, and there was never enough money to save so much as a bit of brass, or to allow a jot of luxury. She lived on barley gruel and she kept chickens for their eggs and grew vegetables in her garden—nothing that needed more than a shove in the ground and a slop of water from the well, though. She hadn't the time.

In winter she would sit beside her closed-stove to keep her fingers warm enough to work. In summer she'd set her wheel

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outside the cottage door, with a plank over the basket of wool to keep the rolls from blowing away in the trickster wind. Even then the breezes would tousle the rolls. They'd flutter the spinster's skirt and her tight-bound hair, as though inviting her to run free with them in the wide world beyond her yard. But if she were to live, the wool must be spun; so the winds played by themselves, and the spinster spun, and spun, until she thought her mind was as round as the wheel itself, and as hobbled in its flight.

Yet she loved those little wind-devils, and winter or summer she sang a song to the humming of the wheel:

*If I were not a spinster, I'd roam this world around:
The tossing winds would carry me wherever
I was bound.*

*If I were not a spinster—though "if" is never "is"—
I'd dance all night on the shores of France,
and breakfast in Cadiz.*

She sang the song once, twice, a hundred times, with the wheel spinning—*zzzeb-zzzeb-zzzeb*—as her foot trod the pedal and her hands fed the wool from the roll.

And that was the life of the spinster: bound by the wheel, and the yarn, and the spinning of her own song.

One summer day, as she sat in her doorway working, an old man came by. He was a magicking man and a wizard, he had the touch of the clever fellow, and behind his bright eyes there were secrets you'd never guess. That is as true or truer than anything else I can tell you.

The spinster saw him from lowered eyes as she spun the wheel and drew out the yarn. She didn't look up, not wanting to seem bold, but never a thought did she have that it was a clever man leaning on the gate of her fence and staring in at her.

She worked the treadle briskly, thinking, Sure it's a



traveling man, for I've never seen his face in the village, or him walking up this road before. There's no telling what a traveler will do, what with the roads all gone to rogues and villains, and the lands wild and the woods deep. Best act as though I've not seen him and tend to my wheel, for they say whoever greets a traveling man greets danger.

So she slipped her hand beneath the edge of the plank and took out another roll of wool. She carefully worked the first thin bits of fuzz into her yarn, then more and more, until the old roll was gone away to nothing and the yarn was eating up the new. As she spun, she kept her eyes down and sang out bold, as though she'd never seen that clever man loitering there in the road.

*If I were not a spinster, though wishing's
only dream,
I'd harness Wind King's steeds
and drive them as my team.*

As she reached down for another roll of wool, the stranger spoke. "Would you really be wanting the wild winds to drive, sweeting? They've a wicked way with them and are hard to hand. It takes a sharp driver to make them run to order."

She kept her eyes on her work but spoke up fast, not wanting him to think her afraid.

"And if they danced and balked, wouldn't I be whipping them up with my spindle, then? That would make them trot quick enough, now wouldn't it?"

"And what would you harness them with, sweeting? It takes a strong harness to hold the winds."

The spinster heard something stirring in his voice, like the promise of a summer storm. She felt the hair on her arms rise, all goose bumps in spite of the summer heat. Yet she snapped her answer out smart and quick.

"I've spent my lifetime on the spinning of yarn, and what

I spin holds strong. If I were to harness the winds, old uncle, I'd harness them with all my yarn, and the weavers' guild could go without."

Still she spun, and still she kept her eyes away from his—for there was no trusting the ways of a traveling man. Her foot pumped, and her wheel turned—*zzzeb-zzzeb-zzzeb*—in the bright afternoon sun, as though nothing uncanny had ever come near.

"A clever answer," said he, and she heard a laugh in his voice. "But what would you bridle them with? And where would you find the coach to carry you?"

Now she began to fear for sure and all, for the ways of traveling men could be strange ways and the questions they asked could lead to strange answers. But still she spoke up firm and fair: "I'd bridle them with my song, uncle. It bites my mouth hard enough as I sit and spin, and it surely should 'bit' theirs. As for a coach, I'd harness them to this spinning wheel and let it carry me where I chose—and better service that would be than it has ever done me before."

"What toll would you pay as you traveled the sky road? No one rides the roads who won't pay the toll."

His voice sougled, as though the winds were prancing in their stalls and stamping their airy hoofs on the floor of heaven, anxious to be off and away. The spinster shivered, for she guessed now that he was no simple traveler, but a clever man and a wizard. Everyone knew that a clever man could do you good or do you ill, but as like as not would change your life, will-you, nill-you.

But she had her pride and she wouldn't be done down while sitting in her own doorway.

"I'd pay one tear for every ocean I passed over, and one drop of blood for each tract of land. I'd give a great cry for the sun when it passed over me driving its own golden

team, and laugh like church bells when the moon was high and held the road."

"And when your team had run its course, where would you stable them, daughter-mine?"

She looked up, at last, into the bright, quick eyes of the clever man. "I'd stable them in my heart, old father, for I've the wild wind there already."

Saying it, she knew it was true. Then the thought of a clever man big as life and bold as brass just outside her fence seemed less dangerous than the thought of him leaving her gate and her life, and nothing to show for it but the memory of clever talk on a summer's afternoon, and the rest of her years spent spinning.

He stepped through the gate and looked at her, hard and long. "If you had the wind to your team, would you go away with me? Think sharp before you answer, child. For a spinster has a cottage and a closed-stove, and chickens and a garden, and a trade to keep her from the charity of the parish and the doors of the poorhouse. But the 'prentice of the clever man must trust to her wits and her will. She's got only the sky to cover her head, and only luck for her pay."

She stood and dropped her wool then. "I'll trust to the luck of the clever man. It's better than slaving at the wheel. I'd rather have wits and freedom than the weariness of this life."

"Are you sure, dear-heart? I'll have to test you sore—and you'd best not start unless you can finish. Spin a spell and spin it wrong, and you pay a price in life or soul. There's those who hoped for the clever way who now feed worms, and as many more who haunt the hills and wail with the storm winds come winter. It's a tetchy trade, and many are lost in the seeking of it." There was no mistaking the warning in his voice, or the cunning secrets that spun and swirled behind his eyes.

The spinster licked her lips and thought on it. She didn't doubt the danger—but the hope of freedom and never

another day of wool? Ah! She'd dare the worst he could test her with for that.

She swallowed hard and faced him down. "If it can be done, then I'll be doing it. I'll not have it said that freedom called and I closed the door on it."

He shook his head and looked her up, then looked her down. "Bold words," says he, "but the doing is the proving. Still, you've the wit and the spirit. You just might do." The clever man smiled then. "Very well. I'd have it so, and so you'd have it, too. But if you want the clever life, you must clever yourself to your trade. You've sung of a team of wind-horses—can you spell such up, or not?"

The spinster was angry as angry, and beneath that was scared as scared. She knew she'd never 'prentice with him if she hadn't a clever mind, but she'd never a knack that she knew of, and she'd never been known for her luck. To call the winds was no small test. Even a wool-bound spinster knew that there's much ill that can come to a spell ill spun. Even if she called the winds themselves, there was no promise she'd call them willing and not wild.

"Is that your last word, uncle? I have to call the winds?"

The clever man shrugged. "Clever is as clever does, and that's the last of it, sweeting. Call the winds and call your trade, or sit at your wheel and be content."

She spoke sharp then, for she had no thought of losing this chance.

"I'll guess I answered rightly all those questions you teased me with, or you'd not be offering. But never did you ask me how I'd call the winds, and never did I answer."

"Well," said the clever man, "if you can answer all my other questions, surely you can answer this? It's a clever riddle for a clever woman."

"Let me think on it awhile, and meantime I'll set about as though I knew already," said she.

She went at it then, as though the horses were already free of their stalls and coursing the skies to come to her. She pulled the spindle from the wheel to use as a whip, and to its tip she tied a leader of wool dyed red as ox blood to serve as a lash. The yarn she'd spun that day she twisted, and braided, and knotted until she had herself harness for a full team of four, for there are four quarters to the world and four wind-horses to gallop it round. She dug in her scrap bags and found red yarn, and black and white and blue, the colors of the winds, and she knotted bright tassels to please the winds and make them feel bold and gay when they ran in their harness. All the while she worked, she turned her song in her mind, over and over, singing under her breath:

*If I were just a spinster, as I most sure am not,
I'd sit beside my closed-stove and never
move a jot.
But never am I a spinster, but a clever
woman bright,
And I shall drive the wild wind-team across
the sky tonight.*

She unlaced her bodice and took it off, and unbuttoned her chemise so that the winds could stable in her breast when they were tired of running. She looked inside her heart and found passion there, and tears, and a laugh like church bells to greet the moon, and a shout like brass gongs to greet the sun, and blood, bright red, to spend on life . . . so she knew she could pay the toll. But still she hadn't an idea how to call the winds to her side.

The sky was clear and blue as bottle glass. The chickens huddled in the scant shade of a lilac bush, with not so much as a breeze to ruffle their feathers or stir the leaves above them. The afternoon was dead: a mirror held to the face of

day would not have shown the faintest fog of breath to prove otherwise.

Then the spinster began to know real fear that the test was beyond her. If the winds didn't come, she'd strangle in a calling half spun and a spell twisted awry.

She looked at her tiny garden patch, with its thin rows of cabbages and carrots and the mounded hills of potatoes. She looked at her cottage, with the tattered muslin at the windows and a weed in a bottle on the sill to serve for color. She looked at the spinning wheel, all ready for her team to be hitched to it. Nowhere did she see a thing to help her solve the riddle of calling down the winds.

Last, half desperate and all fearful, she looked at the basket, with the plank still on it to keep out the trickster wind.

Then she smiled.

She unbound her hair.

She opened the windows of her cottage, with the worn white curtains hanging limp and tired in the stuffy air.

She ripped open her one thin pillow and her feather coverlet so the feathers swirled around her ankles and out across the floor.

She shoveled the ashes from the grate of her closed-stove onto the flags of her doorway.

Then, at the very last, she removed the plank from the basket of wool.

The trees shook, and the chickens ran as a sudden squall of air tossed the dusty leaves of the lilac. Then, oh, then the winds came galloping down! For never was there a wind that could stand to leave hair neat and tidy, or curtains still, or feathers untossed, or ashes in a pile. And never was there a wind that could leave woman's work as it was.

In the little yard the wind-horses pranced and spun. The curtains tossed, the spinster's hair flew wild, the ashes

dusted the sun itself, the feathers made hex signs in the air . . . and the wool was everywhere and then some.

The clever man laughed and called out, "Harness your team, 'prentice. The world is large, and we'd best be off."

Before you could say *snap*, the harness was on and the horses hitched to the wheel. The whip cracked out, and off they were and away, with the clever man riding behind and the spinster shouting to the sun on the horizon so no one could toll her down.

The last anyone saw of them, they were heading into the west, and the last anyone heard of them was the song of the clever woman who had been a spinster:

*If I were a clever woman and, oh, I surely am!
I'd drive a team of wind-steeds, to Catbay or Siam.
And I'd never go back to spinning,
For a spinster's life grows old,
Instead I'd ride across the skies and never mind
the cold.
Oh no! I'd never mind the cold.*

And that, oh my friends, is why you must never leave a spinster to sit alone, singing, or risk letting her talk to a traveling man over a gate on a summer's afternoon: not if you wish your paths to run narrow and your lives to spin out steady and strict, as tightly twisted as the yarn that chokes the spindle.

For the world is always older than it once was, and younger than it will be, and magic can still happen when a woman has the clever touch, and a dream of a team of wind. ❖

