

The Girl and the Milky Way

A fairy tale in the spirit of H.C. Andersen by Henrik Frederiksen, ©ElephantTribe.org

Far, far above the noise and dust of the earth, where eternity unfolds like a vast, dark blue velvet blanket, lay the Milky Way. It was not made of milk, though its glow was white and soft. No, it was made of millions upon millions of tiny stars, crowding so closely together in the infinite space to keep each other company, that from a distance they looked like a shining, silvery river. Some said it was the footprints of angels; others believed it was God's own highway.

Down on earth, it was a harsh and pitch-black night. The wind had laid itself to rest behind the high mountains, and the forest stood silent and brooding. The darkness was thick and heavy, and it wrapped itself around the trunks of the trees like a cold cloak.

"I am the master of the world," whispered the Darkness in its deep, windless voice. "The sun has surrendered, the moon has hidden its face in sorrow, and now all is mine. Down here there is no hope, only shadows that sleep."

But the Darkness, no matter how mighty it felt, had forgotten the Milky Way.

Deep inside the black forest, beneath an old oak tree with crooked branches, sat a little girl. She had been out gathering dry twigs for her grandmother's stove, but she had lost her way as the twilight fell. Now she sat there with her thin shawl pulled tightly around her shoulders, weeping. Her tears were small, but in the vast night sky, even the smallest tear can be heard, if only the heart is listening.

And the stars in the Milky Way were listening.

"Look," said a little, trembling star, sitting right at the edge of the great luminous band. "There sits a human child, freezing. The darkness frightens her."

"We must shine for her," said an older and very wise star, who had seen kingdoms rise and fall. "But we are so small, and the distance is so unimaginably great. A single one of us cannot pierce through the earth's thick night air."

"Then we must shine together!" they all cried in chorus, sending a gentle, musical tremor through the entire vault of the heavens.

And then the Milky Way began to shine as it had never shined before. The stars held hands—for stars have hands too, they are simply made of pure light—and they squeezed them so tightly that they almost burned up with love and zeal. The radiant band across the night sky grew and quivered. The white river of light forced its way down through the freezing expanse of space, down past the sleeping clouds, and laid itself like a silvery-white path right down through the dense canopy of the oak forest.

The Darkness hissed and tried to gather its shadows to swallow the light, but against the united radiance of the Milky Way, it could do nothing. The light touched the little girl's wet cheeks, and she opened her eyes.

There, in the middle of the blackest forest, now lay a faintly glowing path of stardust. It shimmered gently, as if paved with precious stones whispering words of comfort. The girl stood up. She was no longer afraid, for the light reminded her of her grandmother's gentle smile and of warm rooms with a fire in the hearth. She followed the silvery-glowing path, step by step, while the Milky Way watched over her and kept the Darkness at bay.

When she finally saw the outline of her own little village and the warm glow from her home, she looked up. The sky was an endless sea of black, but stretching across it all was the luminous band, tired, but incredibly beautiful.

"Thank you," whispered the little girl, and her breath rose up into the bitter night cold like a small, white prayer.

Up in the myriad of stars, the stars let go of each other's hands a little to rest. Some of the very smallest stars had become so tired that they let go completely and fell across the sky as shooting stars. But they were happy, for they knew that even though the night is dark and vast, and a human life is as short as a fleeting sigh, the light of love—if only everyone shines together—is stronger than even the deepest darkness.

And that is how it comes to be that when, on a clear, pitch-black night, you see the Milky Way shining comfortingly and wondrously in the night sky, it is the stars of heaven holding each other's hands to show the way for those who have lost their way.