

The Paper Swan

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

It was an exceptionally fine piece of paper, thick and cream-colored, and once, a poem had been written upon it in shining gold-ink handwriting. But the poem had been discarded by the poet, for it was not deemed good enough, and now it lay forgotten on a dark workbench.

Here, a little, feverish boy found it. He was tired of lying in his bed, so he took the paper, bent it in the middle, folded the corners with small, careful movements, and when he was finished, the old poem had become a swan—a beautiful paper swan with a pointed beak and wings in elegant folds. When the boy fell asleep shortly after, the swan remained standing on the shiny mahogany table among the desk's fine things.

"Good heavens, what a sight you are," said the penholder, which was always a bit pointed in its manner and looked down upon everything new. "You are neither bird nor fish, only a crippled piece of wreckage that someone has played with."

"I am a swan," thought the paper bird proudly, but it said nothing, for it was distinguished, and a real swan does not chatter needlessly. It knew that deep inside its folded breast sat the golden words, the discarded poem about longing and stars. It carried poetry.

It stood on the table and looked over toward the large washbasin in the corner, where the water rocked gently whenever horse-drawn carriages passed by out on the street.

"Alas," thought the paper swan, "out there is where I want to be. I want to glide quietly across the smooth surface and reflect my white neck, just as the real swans do in the king's garden. I have it in me, I can feel it!"

"You would disintegrate, you fool!" laughed the heavy, old tailor's scissors, snapping its jaws warningly as if it could hear the swan's thoughts. "You think you are something, but you are just made of wood pulp and glue. You cannot endure the world at all. A single raindrop, and you are lost!"

But the paper swan did not listen. It closed its invisible eye and dreamed of deep, blue water and the rush of wind beneath its wings.

And the wind is, as we know, a fickle master. One afternoon, the window was ajar, and a strong gust of wind swept into the room. It rustled the papers on the table, and suddenly, it caught hold of the paper swan's pointed wings. With a mighty tug, it was lifted from the mahogany table.

"I am flying!" rejoiced the swan, feeling an intoxicating freedom. "Just look, scissors and penholder! Now I ascend toward the sky!"

And it did indeed fly, driven by the draft, right over the windowsill, out into the great world, and down toward the cobbled courtyard. It had rained heavily all morning, and in the middle of the cobblestones lay a large, deep puddle, reflecting the sky's drifting gray clouds.

"A lake!" thought the swan as it drifted through the air.

"My destiny calls to me. Now I shall swim, now I shall finally show them who I am, and let the world understand my true nature."

It landed so softly, so softly. For a moment, it was quite enchanting. It glided on the water, proud and upright, reflecting its pointed profile on the surface.

But water is cold and merciless to those not made for it. And paper is fragile. It immediately soaked up the moisture. Its wings, which had previously been so sharp and fine, lost their hold and began to droop. Its proud neck became heavy, terribly heavy, and bowed tiredly toward the water.

"Look at that piece of trash," grumbled a large dog that trudged past in the courtyard and sniffed at the puddle. "Who throws paper here?"

No one heard the golden words it hid inside. The world saw only a crumpled piece of paper that was dissolving in dirty water. The swan sank slower and slower. It could not sing its swan song, for paper birds have no voice, but just as it completely disintegrated and let go of life, the gold letters from the old poem flowed slowly out into the water. For a very brief moment, the words colored the gray puddle in a mild, golden glow of beauty, which the wind carried away.

The world never understood it—it could not, for to the world it was merely a meaningless scrap of paper. But it knew itself, as it vanished, that deep down it had carried the finest poetry, and that it had met its wet, deep element like a true swan.