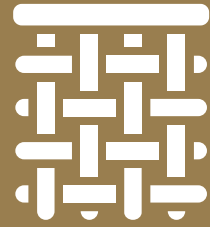


# The Rag Maiden

A story of intuition, connection and service to a community even when unnoticed by others.



There was once upon a time, a long time ago a town built of stone that was cut into the side of a mountain in the far north. In this part of the world, it got very cold in the winter and the thick blanket of snow remained for many months longer than the towns to the south. There was a brief and bountiful summer where wildflowers covered every inch of earth and all families grew potatoes and turnips and greens that they would eat through the long winter. When the first snow fell, meat was salted, stored, and rationed along with all the vegetables in root cellars. Then the people of this town of stone would pile their wood to keep their homes warm, tuck fresh mortar of sand, clay, and lime between the big stones that built their walls and repair any leaks in the birch bark and sod roof.

As this was a remote town – a week’s walk to the nearest town – the people never threw anything away, but gave everything a new purpose once it was seemingly “used up” or “worn out”. Old furniture was transformed into new toys for the children, broken pottery became decorative mosaics and colorful walkways, dented cookware was melted down into knives, and tools and clothing became all sorts of things. Once a dress was worn out, it was turned into a shirt, a shirt into a vest, and a vest into pieces for a quilt, and an old quilt into a babies blanket, and when any cloth was no longer able to be turned into anything else – it was given to the Rag Maiden.

The Rag Maiden was a slight woman of uncertain age who lived in a small stony hovel at the end of town. She kept to herself when at home, but when she went out collecting – she was friendly and a joy to all. She was welcomed into every home and treated to a warm meal and an evening of stories. When it was time for her to go, the people of the home would bring out the torn, battered, and generally “worn out” cloth and hold it out to the Rag Maiden. The small woman would gingerly take the item from their hands as if she were taking something precious like a kitten or a pet mouse, and she would ease it into a special sack she carried with her at all times. Then she would bow, offer her thanks, and return to her small stony hovel at the end of town.

She visited homes many nights a week and the rest of her time was spent inside her own home alone. What she did inside her small stony hovel was a mystery to everyone in that town, and no one ever dared ask. There was something about the Rag Maiden that begged her privacy and no one ever disturbed it. She never spoke of herself or what she did with the rags given to her and no one ever asked questions.

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They had ideas however and many rumors circulated around the town. Some imagined her little house to be filled with rags and they thought she must be stuffed in there like a squirrel in a hollow tree. Others would giggle and say fanciful things like she might be an earthen dwarf who lives underground where rags are like gold. They proposed that perhaps she was the richest among them and that they were fools to give away such a precious commodity for free. But even as they laughed, something inside them all knew that there was some strange truth to their jokes – though the details might not be accurate.

But what happened inside the Rag Maiden's little stone hovel was far more curious and magical than was ever imagined by her fellow citizens – and perhaps even by you. But before I tell you what sort of wonder occurred behind her closed door, I should tell you first of a wonder that occurred outside her door – or rather outside the doors of the townspeople, once a year – on the longest darkest night of the year.

There was a strange tradition in this town that everyone looked forward to, where a gift was found on the doorstep of a single household. No one knew whose doorstep it would be from year to year, but everyone hoped it would be theirs. The gift was always the same item – though totally unique in its making. It was a carpet. An expertly woven colorful carpet. It was a small carpet by our standards, but to the people of those days, it seemed enormous. It would be rolled up with a ribbon and a note that always said the same thing “To warm feet on a cold night”. Now, these were not just words in this case because what was most extraordinary about the carpet was that it was indeed warm. It was always warm – even when the fire was low and the house was cold – the carpet would always be warm. In a place where firewood was scarce and warmth was essential for life – a magically warm carpet was a treasure indeed.

No one knew where the carpet came from or who had made it or why it remained warm when everything else around it was cold – but perhaps out of superstition or a sense that talking about it might make the magic cease – no one talked about the carpets, only quietly noted them when visiting other homes. Some homes had one carpet, some had two, a few had three and indeed there were homes that had none at all. No one could understand why one household would have three of these carpets and another would have none when they all experienced the same bitter cold every year. In the past, people would try to give their carpets away – to make it fairer but strangely the warmth would disappear and the carpet would be as cold as everything else. Not until the carpet was returned to its given home would the warmth return – and so in time, the townspeople accepted the carpets and the strange reasons why one family got so many and another got none.

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One of the homes that had never received a carpet was Katri's home. She was a young girl of 9 years who was the only child of a hardworking woodcutter and his wife. No one could understand why such a fine, kind-hearted family that was always helping others – did not receive one of the magical carpets. The only thought was that the home was already so filled with the warmth of generosity and love that it did not need a carpet – but the truth was, it was still quite cold with the paltry fire and frozen stone walls. A magically warm carpet would be a benefit to them to be sure.

But Katri's family did not worry or consider such things much – if a carpet was meant for them then so be it – if not, then they would manage well enough. They had managed the year before, they would manage again.

Now earlier I had said that no one knew where the carpets came from or who had made them – and that was not exactly true. Katri had a suspicion that the carpets came from the Rag Maiden. She had a particular interest in the Rag Maiden and looked forward to the times when they had a bit of cloth to give her. Katri studied the slight woman, watched her every move, and listened to every word with strict attention. And when the bit of cloth was handed over, Katri noticed something that the others did not. The moment the bit of cloth touched the Rag Maiden's hands, it seemed to shimmer – only for a moment – and then it would become a normal rag again. Katri looked for the shimmer every time and she was never disappointed.

And what made Katri suspect that the Rag Maiden had been responsible for the magical carpets was that occasionally, when visiting someone's home, she might out of the corner of her eye notice the same shimmer – only for a moment – coming from a carpet. Once she looked directly at the carpet, the shimmer would disappear – but it was there, she was sure of it, a moment before.

So one year Katri decided she would try to find out. She knew she needed a rag to offer the Rag Maiden and all she had was a small scarlet red blanket that had been hers for years. It had grown old and ragged and the largest part of it had been stitched into a pillow. The smaller part she used as a handkerchief – but now it was tattered and stained. She had been resistant to give it up because it was so dear to her – but her desire to find out the truth about the carpets was so strong, she decided to give it away. The Rag Maiden was summoned to come that night to retrieve it. Before she came, however, Katri took the bit of cloth in her hands and made a wish,

“Let me know what becomes of you” she whispered to the scarlet red rag – and at that moment the bit of cloth sparkled and shimmered unlike she had ever seen before. Her eyes widened at the sight and she wondered if she should drop the cloth – when the shimmering stopped and the rag became a normal rag again. Katri knew that something important had happened – but she wasn't sure what it was. She assumed that in some kind of remarkable and unbelievable way, the rag was telling her that it had heard her wish.

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Now, in a way this was true. This rag – this simple piece of cloth was not just a scrap of woven thread – it was a cherished part of the household. It began as a beautiful shawl given to Katri's mother when she was married. In time it was cut into pieces to make a baby's blanket that kept little Katri warm and cozy in her crib. Then it was a plaything, sometimes a puppet, sometimes a hat, sometimes a small cape – and all these memories gathered into the weave of the cloth and held on to it. That little scarlet red scrap had so much life stored up in it that it was no wonder it didn't stand up and dance around like a fairy. In many ways it was like a fairy – a little being that wished to continue being useful – continue being part of life.

So when Katri whispered a wish to the rag, all the gathered memories stored up inside could not help but get excited and – well, behave like a little rag fairy – they sparkled. They sparkled and shimmered for a moment out of appreciation and love for the girl. And then they became quiet again.

This was the secret of the Rag Maiden. She understood the nature of rags and how they stored up years of memories. Every bit of fabric and tattered cloth had a story to tell, but no one to tell it to. So the Rag Maiden provided a service, if you will, for she gave the bits of cloth and rags a place to share their tale. She gave them a way of expressing all those memories in a way that people could – well, not quite understand, but certainly appreciate. The Rag Maiden was careful and respectful of the bits of cloth – gingerly transporting them back to her small hovel. And then when the door was closed, she took them out of her special bag, laid them out, and talked to them. She let them know she saw them and knew they were there. Then she was quiet. She did not talk, she did not make a sound – she only listened. She listened so intently that the room itself was still. And in that stillness and silence, the memories would unfold. They would tell their tale – and the Rag Maiden would remain still and silent until the memories were complete and fully expressed. Then she would breathe out and quietly invite the rags to become something new – something magical.

The Rag Maiden would pick up the little bits of cloth and show them to the others. All the other bits of cloth and fabric were now woven together carefully and artfully into a carpet – a rag carpet of so many colors and patterns. The new bits of cloth would be laid out next to the carpet and all the memories were now free to swirl and dance with all the other memories. With the memories free, the bit of cloth could now be woven into the carpet as well.

And what happened to all those memories swirling and dancing about the woven rag carpet? Well, they became warm – just like we do when we dance – it's just that memories never tire, they keep swirling and weaving and jumping and tapping away.

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So Katri's suspicion was true. The magical carpets did indeed come from the Rag Maiden - she expertly wove them with her own hands and when completed, gave them away in the middle of the longest night of the year. She always did the same thing which was to walk slowly down the street, holding the carpet and waiting for the shimmer and sparkle to tell her that she had arrived in the carpet's rightful home. She never questioned the location, but happily laid the rolled gift at the doorstep and then returned home. Another carpet was delivered.

Well, the night Katri made her wish on the bit of scarlet red blanket, the Rag Maiden arrived, shared a meal with them, and then took the rag to her home. There were only a few days until the special night when she would deliver the next carpet which was very nearly complete. It was missing the right fabric for the fringe at the end - and when the Rag Maiden laid it out - she knew she had found it.

Nights passed and then the longest night arrived. The sun set very early - soon after the midday meal and then it got darker and darker and one by one, all the townspeople went to sleep. All but one. Katri could not sleep. There under her layers of thick wool and puffy quilts, she was still cold. She saw that the fire was low and pulled back her covers to go to the woodstove. She opened the door and placed a small log on top of the coals and then closed it - making sure the damper was very low to make the log last. As she tip-toed back to her bed, she heard something outside - a kind of rustling.

Though she was cold and could see her breath, she tip-toed over to the door and put her ear against it. The thick wood was very cold to the touch but she could hear a slight scratching and dragging sound and then a thud. She stood back and then decided to open the door to discover its source. As she lifted the latch, a burst of cold air and snow burst into the room and she nearly closed it again, had she not seen something lying on the doorstep? She squinted in the cold air and bent down to discover that it was a roll of carpet. She smiled and looked into the wind to see if she could divine who brought it - but there was no sign of anyone - not even footsteps.

With all her strength she pulled the roll into her house and then closed the door. She was still and silent for a moment as she looked down at the roll of the carpet. She saw a ribbon and a card that read "To warm feet on a cold night." When she moved her hand to the ribbon to unroll the carpet, she was surprised to feel that it was warm. She knew that these carpets were warm - but somehow experiencing the warmth in her own home was surprising. Her hand glided over the warm textured surface as she lay the carpet out. It was big and soft and in the dim light from the stove, appeared to be so very beautiful.

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Katri climbed onto the carpet and lay down, soaking in the warmth and softness, then she rolled over and saw it. In the thin light of the stove, she saw a particular color at the edge of the carpet that she knew very well. It was scarlet. She touched the bit of scarlet with her hand and at that moment it sparkled and shimmered like before. It was her blanket. The blanket that was once her mother's shawl - a piece of cloth that was given away to the rag maiden and now, had found its way back home. She lay with her head down on the carpet and in that moment was washed with memories - memories of when she was little and played with the little blanket. Then other memories came - memories of her mother when she was younger - memories from before she was born. These mixed with memories of other people and places and they all swirled together in a dance.

Katri, feeling so warm and happy, snuggled into the carpet - rolled either end over herself like a swaddled baby - and with the warm, happy memories swirling around her, she fell asleep.