



# **Keturah and Lord Death**

A Storybook Adaptation of Martine Leavitt's Novel



**Adapted by Thora Reed**



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ADAPTED BY THORA REED  
2014

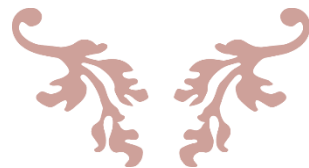


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Because I could not stop for Death,  
He kindly stopped for me;  
The carriage held but just ourselves  
And Immortality.

*From "The Chariot" by Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)*

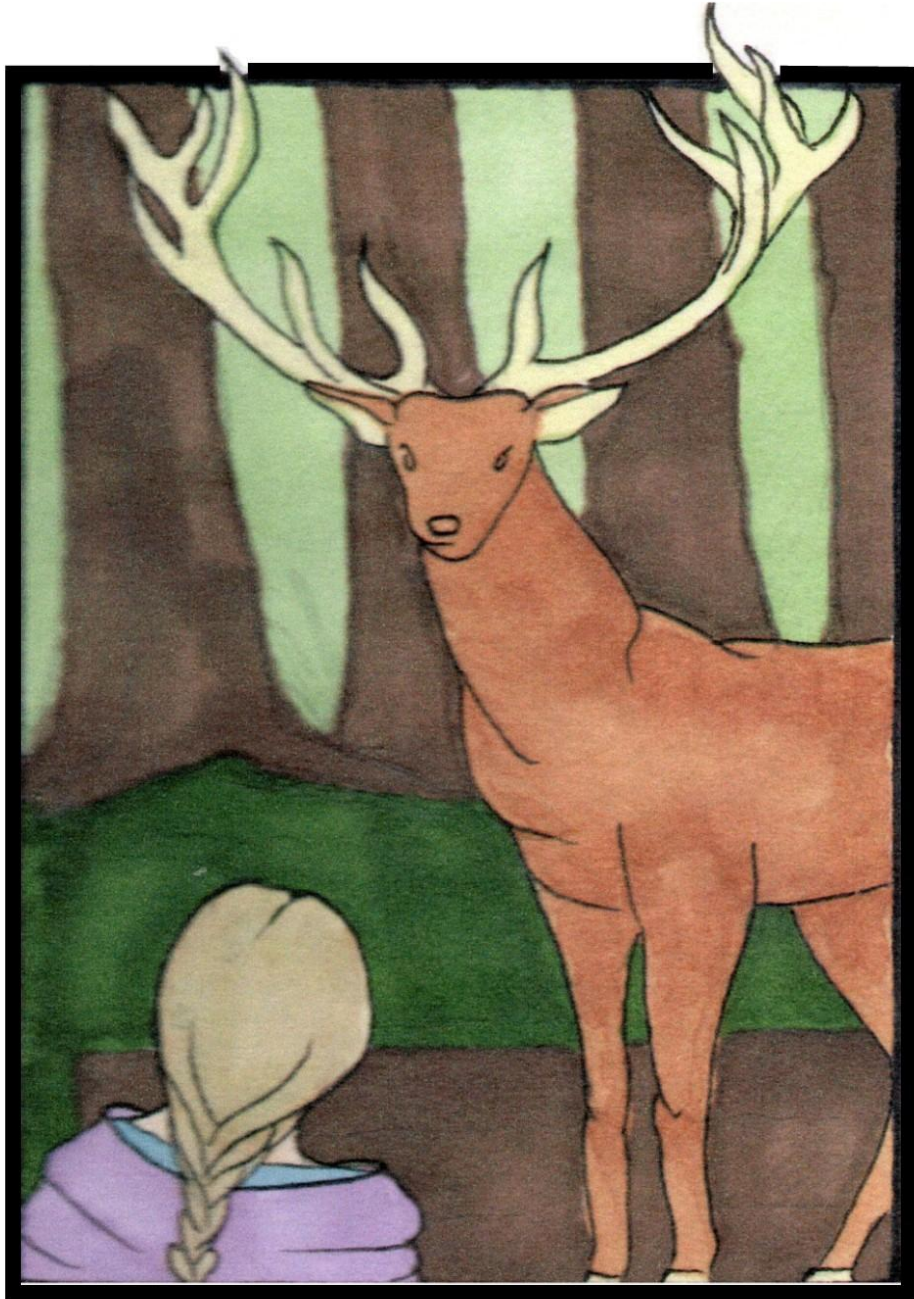
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*Once upon a time* in the small village of Tide-by-Rood, there lived a young storyteller named, Keturah. She was admired throughout the village for her gift of weaving tales. Everyone, young and old alike, would sit around the common fire and listen as she told her stories. But on one fine day, as she was out picking vegetables in her Grandmother's garden, she found herself embarking on a tale of her own. For you see, the great stag of Lord Temsland's forest was also in Grandmother's garden that day, nibbling quite contentedly on Grandmother's beet greens. Keturah was mesmerized by the creature's wondrous beauty. So when this remarkable stag was finished eating Grandmother's greens and turned to go back into the woods, Keturah couldn't help herself but follow.

Keturah had only meant to go a little ways into the woods, but she was so caught up in catching another glimpse of the stag, she did not notice herself becoming lost before it was much too late. And as a result Keturah wandered through the forest for days without finding her way back home. On the third day, starving and past the point of exhaustion, Keturah collapsed beneath a tree and did not get up again. As she sat there, she dreamed of the life she wanted so badly to live. A life with a small cottage to clean, her own sweet baby to hold, and a one true love to be her husband.

However, Keturah did not have much time to dwell on the life she would not live, for at dusk, death came to her in the form of a man. At first, Keturah was frightened, but as she looked upon Lord Death, she could see that beneath his hood he was a goodly man, severe but beautiful, not old but in the time of his greatest powers. Nor was he surrounded with worm and rot as she had suspected. Death was as clean as stone, and as far from life as wind and rain and cold. But even as



Keturah's fear of Death lessened, she had a fight to live within her, and she would try and stay on this earth as long as she could.

Keturah tried to persuade Lord Death to let her live, but he refused. Saying that although she was both, brave and beautiful, he could not be swayed. However, as a last hope, Keturah began to tell him a story. A love story. A story of a love so strong that it could not be conquered even by death. But Death did not believe her, saying that he had seen many loves and none were so great that he could not divide them. Nevertheless, Keturah continued in her telling. And the more she spoke of finding a true love, the more Death listened.

Until he asked, mesmerized, "Could such a love be?"

"We will never know," Keturah replied. "For one day Death came for the girl. She knew that her soul's heart would love as much as her living heart, and that she would ache for eternity for her true love. She tried to tell Lord Death how even he would rejoice for the sweetness of that hoped-for love, if only he would let it be. But Death would not be persuaded, for he had found her first, and yet..."

"And yet?" Lord Death asked.

"The end of the story I cannot tell – will not tell. Let me live until tomorrow, sir," Keturah begged. "Take me home, and I swear that I will come to you in the wood and tell you the rest of the story."

Lord Death looked at Keturah silently for a long moment, before shaking his head and saying, "You think too highly of love. Love is no more than a story spun out of dust and dreams. But I would know the end, and I confess I hope you can indeed show me a love that is greater than death. Return to me tomorrow, and you will come with me then. In fact – " Lord Death continued. "I'll grant you further boon – find this love in the day I have given you, and you will live and not come with me at all. But, if you cannot, I have decided that when I take you tomorrow, I will indeed make you my bride. What do you say to that, Keturah?"





Keturah was shocked. It was one thing to die and quite another to be the Wife of Death. So she refused him, telling him that she will marry for love. And that she will live and breathe and dance and tell her children stories for many years to come. But Death had different plans, and before leaving her in the woods just outside her Grandmother's cottage, he said, "There is no refusing me, Keturah. Tomorrow night I will come for you when the shadows of the forest touch your cottage."

It was not long before Keturah was found. John Temsland, son of Lord Temsland, was the best tracker in the land and found her quietly stumbling home. Seeing this, John Temsland gently lifted her into his arms and carried her home. He told her that the whole village had been searching for her and everyone thought that she was certainly dead. Once home, Keturah and her Grandmother graciously thanked John, before Keturah crawled into bed and slept the rest of the night away.

In the late hours of morning, Keturah awoke to the delicious smell of a cooling meat pie. She could not contain her joy as she sat down and dug straight into the pie with a spoon. However, her joy did not last very long because once she was finished she headed out into the village to find her true love.

As Keturah walked through the village, she looked at old and young, fair and plain, tall and small. She gazed at fat and thin, hairy and bald, rich and poor. Keturah told herself that she did not care who her true love was, as long as she found him. When she did not see any man that moved her heart, she began making a list of eligible men she did not see. Ben Marshall, the best gardener in the village was of marriageable age. Maybe she would bake her best pie and pay him a visit, for he could be her true love. Or the windower, Tailor, who had still not found a new mother for all his children. Maybe Keturah had also not taken the time to fully notice him? As Keturah walked past the chapel she could hear the sound of the organ being played. The Choirmaster was a wonderful musician, if only he did not





play such somber music. He was the wealthiest bachelor in the village, what could he be so melancholy about? Perhaps he just needed a sweet young love to raise his spirits? Keturah had sighed then, for the eligible men could be counted with a single hand.

But instead of wasting her day, she returned home and began baking a pie to take to Ben Marshall. She knew the pie would have to be excellent for Ben to love her, so she worked and worked at making the crust just right. Keturah labored for many hours over that pie, but just as she was about to put it in to bake there was a knock on the door.

Grandmother had sent Goody Thompson's nephew to get Keturah. For you see, Grandmother was the village midwife and it appeared that she needed help at Goody's birth. So without a thought, Keturah wrapped her shawl around herself and followed the boy to Goody's house. Keturah was silently grateful for an excuse to delay her meeting with Death just a little longer. She had not found a true love, and Lord Death would know it.

As Keturah stepped over the threshold of Goody Thompson's house, she thought that her own fear had screamed out, but instead it was Goody herself. Lord Death stood, royal and commanding, in the shadows of the room. Keturah realized then, that she had seen Lord Death more than once before, many times in fact. He had been there in the shadows, comely and sober, patiently waiting at other birthings. But Keturah had known even as a child not to bring attention to his presence. He had always been there, and she had tried to live most days as if he were not so often before her. To silently keep the secret that if she was to see Death than someone would soon weep. But Keturah told herself that today would not be one of those days, and marched across the room towards Death.

Lord Death nodded to her and said, "Well met, Keturah. You were supposed to come to me tonight... did you not fear to incur my anger?"

But Keturah was not lost in the woods today and she did not fear him as she should. She knew that his presence meant only one thing, that Goody Thompson and her baby may not live to see tomorrow. So instead of answering, Keturah sat down sharply in the chair beside him and stated that she would stay until the baby was born. Death shrugged, saying that that moment might never come. Keturah refused to believe him.

“You try my patience, Keturah.” He said.

“How can you let her die?” Keturah whispered.

Lord Death sighed then, running his hand through his hair. “Keturah I would have you know I take no pleasure in this. At least not this part of it. But it is better this way.”

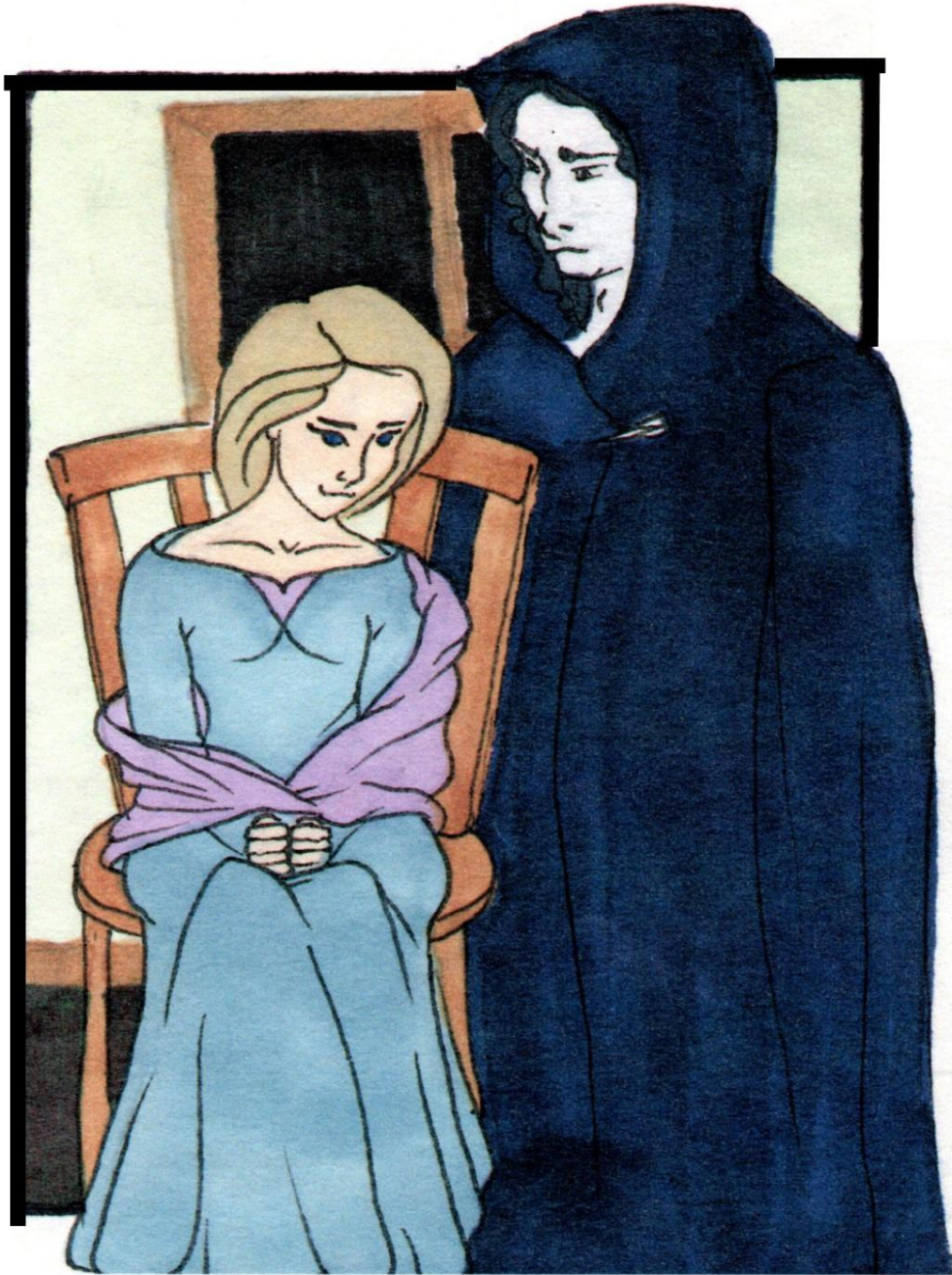
“How could this be better?” Keturah asked, looking up at him. “You can stop this.” she said, “Please, stop this. Stop this for me.”

Lord Death was very still, for a very long time, before at last he said, “Keturah, for your compassion, you shall have Goody’s and the baby’s life. But first you must tell me the end of the story as you promised you would. Did the girl find her true love?”

Keturah had not thought of an ending at all, for she had been so caught up in her own ending and saving Goody’s life first. But fear must be a fine storyteller, for out of the depths of her mind floated the words. But these words were not of an ending, but of a new beginning. Death became very still as he listened. For this new story was about himself. About how his heart yearned for a love of its own. A companion to ease his loneliness and comfort his heart. But who would love such a one? What maid would come willingly? For he would have it be willingly.

As Keturah spoke she saw his vulnerability, how when entranced by her story he appeared no more than a man. Keturah told him of his own heart’s secret, by saying “that he waited without waiting, and dreamed of what he could not





imagine, and performed his endless work and lived only in the moments out of which eternity is spun, knowing it was hopeless.”

“And then?” Death asked.

Keturah said nothing.

“And then!” He demanded.

Keturah closed her eyes, ready for his anger, as she said, “And because the girl knew his secret, she asked, ‘Give me another day, and I will tell you the ending tomorrow.’” Keturah waited to feel his impatient touch, pulling her away into the heart of the still and ever-dark forest.

But the touch did not come. And Keturah opened her eyes to find Death softly gazing upon her. “For an ending to this story, I can pay a life and a day,” he said. “Come at day’s end. And do not be late.” Keturah opened her mouth to speak, not sure whether she was feeling gratitude or triumph, but before she could even utter one word, Lord Death was gone.

Keturah stumbled home, just as the sun was rising over the trees. Goody had given birth to a healthy baby boy, and Keturah was exhausted from her further dealings with Death. Keturah fell onto her bed, not even bothering to change her clothes, and slept the morning through.

In the early afternoon, Keturah awoke and set to work on finishing her pie for Ben Marshall. She tried to be as quiet as she could, for her grandmother was still asleep. And once her pie was cooled and ready, she kissed her still sleeping Grandmother on the forehead and headed out into the village.

The whole village was in a commotion, as Keturah made her way up the road to Ben Marshall’s house. Everyone was rushing about doing errands, and fixings, and cleanings. It was not until Keturah bumped into John Temsland that she found out what was going on.



“The king is coming!” He told her excitedly. “He shall be here tomorrow and we shall have a fair in his honor. There will be contests and prizes, and it is said that he will grant a wish to whomever most pleases him at the fair! Isn’t that wonderful?”

Keturah was delighted. Surely she could find her true love in time and live to see the fair! But in her excitement Keturah almost dropped her basket full of the pie, and if John Temsland had not caught it up quickly, it would surely have been disastrous. Keturah laughed with relief, while thanking John. What would she have done if she had dropped Ben Marshall’s pie?

“You have a sweet laugh, Keturah,” John Temsland said, with a broad smile. “I bet it is just as sweet as the filling in that pie of yours.” Keturah couldn’t help but blush in response, making John’s smile grow even wider. The young lord’s son was as handsome as he was talented. One day, when he took hold of this land, he would make it greater than even the capital itself. For he was both courageous and kind.

“Do you plan to enter your pie in the contest for Best Cook at the fair?” John Temsland asked.

“Oh no, I baked this pie for Ben Marshall.” Keturah answered, flustered.

“Ben Marshall? Do you often bring pie to Ben Marshall?” John asked, his smile fading. He seemed deflated by her answer. But Keturah couldn’t think why it would matter. John was a lord’s son and she was a peasant just like Ben.

“This will be the first.” She said.

“Well, I hope that it is not the best pie he has ever tasted, for he plans to marry the best cook in the village. It’s a Marshall family tradition.” John told her.

“Why would I not want it to be the best pie?” Keturah asked, becoming irritated.

“Because he wants a cook, not a true love, and you want a true love.” John answered quietly.

And before she could answer, John gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and ran off. Leaving her in the middle of the road surround by the chaos of the village preparing for the fair and the king’s arrival. Keturah could only walk numbly to Ben Marshall’s house, trying to make sense of what just happened between her and John. Was John in love with her? She did not know. Was he her true love? She did not have time to find out, for Ben Marshall was returning home, just as Keturah was arriving.

“Good afternoon, Ben Marshall,” Keturah said with her best smile. “I have baked you a pie.”

Ben Marshall beamed down at Keturah, saying “I do love a good pie.”

“I am hoping it is the best you have ever tasted.” Keturah admitted.

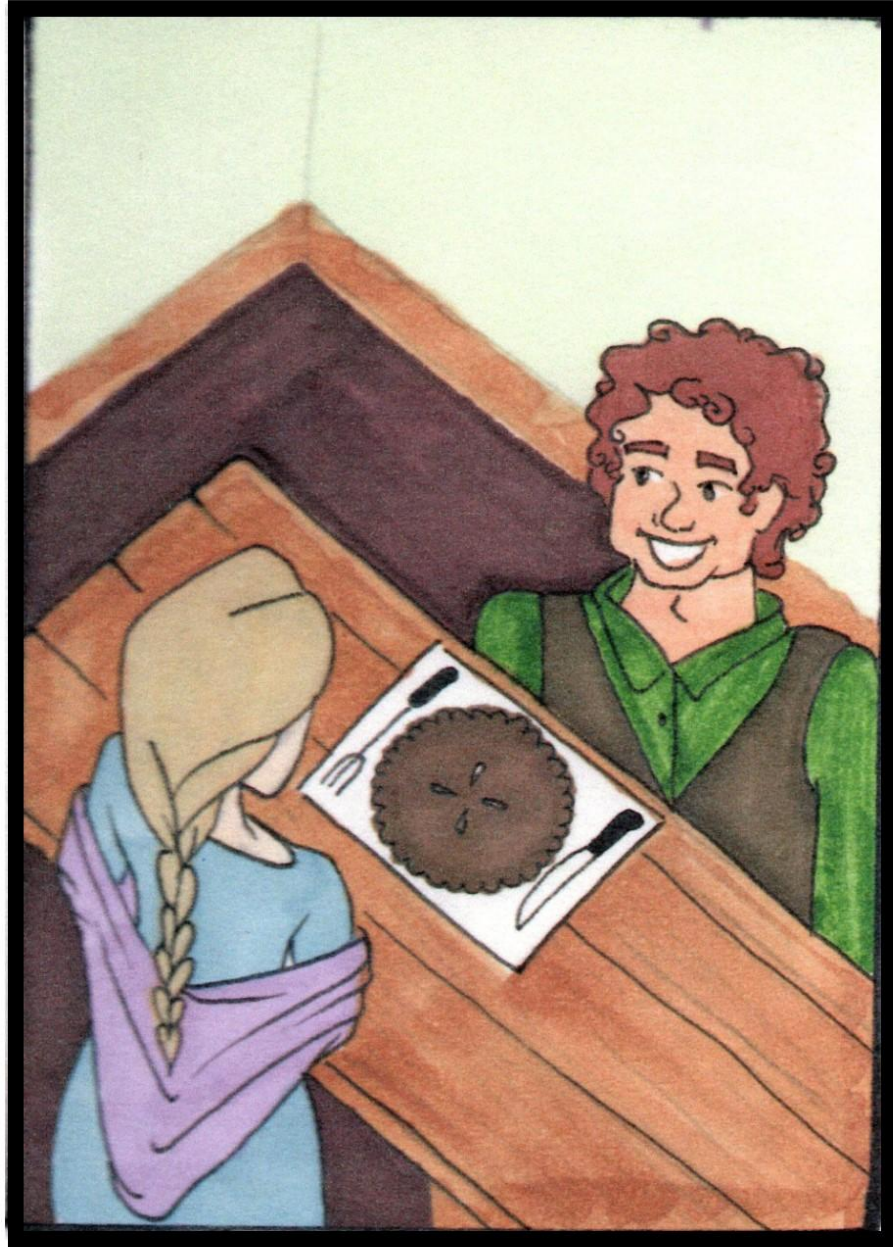
Ben Marshall then ushered Keturah into his house, where he happily tasted her pie. He sat there chewing for a long time, tasting every aspect of her crust and berry filling. Keturah stood quietly before him nervously awaiting his verdict.

When Ben Marshall finally swallowed, he asked, “Do you plan to enter in the contest for Best Cook at the fair tomorrow?”

“Well, I was hoping to...” Keturah trailed off, not sure how to finish.

He gave her a big open smile. “Well I think you would surely win! That is the best pie crust I have ever tasted! In fact, I am hoping you do. For you see, the men in my family have a tradition of marrying only the winners of Best Cook at the fair... I can only marry the Best Cook, Keturah.”

Keturah nodded. John Temsland had told her as much. Ben enthusiastically thanked Keturah for the pie, wishing her best of luck at the fair tomorrow before she took her leave. On her way home, Keturah learned from the village gossip that



the Choirmaster had plans to announce his proposal of marriage tomorrow during the fair. And that Tailor, the widower, had recently been spending time with a maiden from the village who had made all his children new clothes for the fair. This day was not the day Keturah had been hoping for... and it did not improve when the village gossip began to speak of dealings with Death. And how people were talking, people like Good Thompson's husband were saying that Keturah could see someone's death coming. That it was not fairies who stole her in the forest but that it was by Death himself.

"That is *Lord* Death to you," Keturah blurted out, before running home.

Keturah burst into her little cottage, calling out for her Grandmother. "Grandmother! They know! I think they know I can see Death!" Keturah yelled. But there was no answer. Keturah went to her Grandmother's room and found her still in bed. Keturah had been so caught up in finding her true love, she had not realized that her grandmother sleeping so late was unusual. But now as Keturah stood over her, she could see the poor color in her grandmother's cheeks, and how her breathing was far too uneven for simple sleep.

"Grandmother?" Keturah asked again, tears coming to her eyes. But her grandmother did not awaken. Keturah could see that she did not have time to wait for an answer. So she kissed her grandmother on the forehead, promised that she would return soon, and fled into the darkening woods.

It did not take Keturah long to find Death, for he was waiting for her among the trees. Angry and scared Keturah cried out at him, "Do you think by flaunting your power you will make me love you?"

"Your grandmother is old, Keturah." He said. "I would have told you this day was coming if you would have listened."

But Keturah was too upset to listen, even now. A warning would have made no difference. So instead she asked him for another favor. "Please, forgive me," She began, "I know that nothing is too late for you. I ask – I ask –"

“Do not ask, Keturah!” He commanded quietly. But in his voice was the hint of a plea.

“Forgive me, my lord, “Keturah said, “but I must ask for you to save the life of my grandmother.”

Keturah did not look up, but saw as his boots stepped before her. He spoke to her in a voice she has never heard before. A voice that spoke directly to her heart. “Keturah, don’t you know your soul is mine?” He said. “Not a man on this earth, no king, no wise man, is greater than I. Every one of them humbles himself before me one day. Yet you, Keturah, a peasant girl, bargain with me, rob me, and ask greater and greater favors of me – all the while saying you will marry for love! What do you say to this?”

The idea of him refusing, made it hard for Keturah to breathe. “What if, this time,” she tried, “I give you something. Something precious.”

Death shook his head. “There is nothing you could give me,” he said, with great dignity.

But Keturah knew he was wrong and took a step closer to him. She had nothing else so precious. And with the courage of the last step, she looked up at him. His eyes were not the clouded, vacant eyes of one dead. Instead they were clear. Clear as the endless night sky with its unspeakable sorrow and matchless beauty. And as his lips parted to speak again, Keturah did not wait and pressed her lips gently against his. For a moment the breath and life went out of her, and there was no time and no tomorrow, but only her lips against his. Although, Keturah did not wait to see what would happen next, and stepped away quickly, panting for air.

The shadows around Death’s face seemed to lighten. His lordly demeanor had vanished, and his face held nothing but astonishment and something else Keturah could not name. Keturah found her voice then as she looked at his charming face. “Sir, I know you can do anything...”



“Why can I not deny you, Keturah?” He asked, his voice quietly insistent.

Keturah knew that she must answer him with the truth, for it was only fair. So she did, and said, “It is because you love me.”

The Lord of Death nodded in acceptance, before saying, “Your beloved grandmother is safe. You have until the end of the fair, and then I will send the stag for you.” And in the next moment he was gone. Keturah wasted no time standing there in the silence of the woods, before running home.

“Grandmother?” Keturah called out as she entered the cottage.

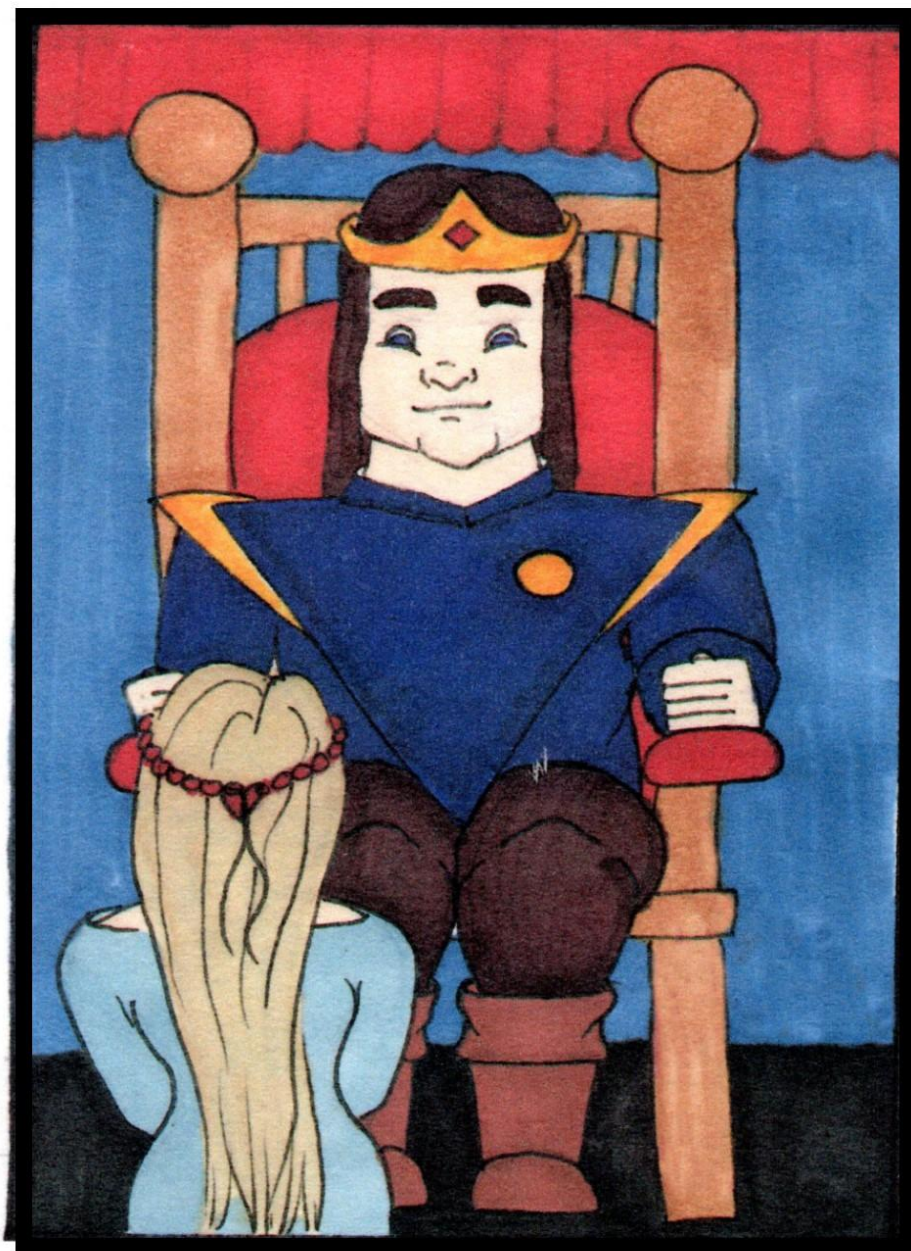
“Keturah?” Her grandmother answered. Relief washed over Keturah as she entered the small bedroom. Her grandmother was sitting up, color already returned to her cheeks. And in that moment, Keturah silently thanked Lord Death for all he has done for her. “I’m glad you have returned. I worried when I woke up alone that perhaps you had gotten lost in the woods again.”

“No, Grandmother,” Keturah said, as she sat down on the edge of the bed. “I will never be lost in the woods again.”

“Yes, because that nice young lord’s son, John, will find you.” Grandmother said with a smile.

But Keturah hadn’t been thinking of John as her rescuer. She had not thought of John since their conversation in the street earlier. Keturah thought about this for a moment before asking, shyly, “Grandmother, what is love?”

Keturah’s grandmother looked at her steadily, trying to determine if Keturah was being sincere or not. And when she decided somewhere in her mind that she was, her Grandmother answered her with this, “I will tell you a true thing, child, and if you are wise you will remember it. The soul, it longs for a mate as much as the body. But if you would be happy all your days, as I was with your grandfather, marry the soul and not the body. Look for a soul-and-heart love.”



Keturah stayed with her grandmother for the rest of the night.

Keturah was awakened the next morning with a gentle shake. “It is getting late, Keturah,” Her grandmother said. “You will want to wash before the dancing begins. People are already gathering, saying that the king as arrived at the manor house.”

Keturah spent the rest of the morning washing. When she was finished she put on a clean dress and brushed out her hair. Keturah was so happy that she was going to the fair that she had forgotten all about the pie she planned to enter in the contest for winning Best Cook. But then again that didn’t really seem to matter anymore. Somewhere in her heart she knew that Ben Marshall was not going to be her true love. And she was fine with that. Keturah could feel that today would bring change to the life she loved so dearly.

Keturah and her Grandmother went out to the street just in time to see the king ride through the village while heralds blew their horns and the crowd cheered. The king was followed by his messengers and escorts to one side, and Lord Temsland on the other. There was joy on all their faces as they passed Keturah and her Grandmother. Shortly behind the rest, came John Temsland and his mother, Lady Temsland. As John passed Keturah he leaned over to hand her a brilliantly red rose. Keturah gave him a quick curtsy and a smile, before he moved on.

The rest of the day was filled with music. Keturah and her Grandmother walked the booths admiring all the lovely offerings. At one of the booths, Keturah purchased a ring of red ribbon for her hair. She wore it for the rest of the day, as she and her grandmother watched the competitions of strengths, the talent shows, and the ribbon winners for Best Cook and other specialties.

And then as the sun began to hang low in the sky, the dancing began. All Keturah wanted to do was live in the noise and music and laughter of the fair. So she took her Grandmother’s hand and plunged into the middle of it. Keturah was

immediately asked to dance by one of the gentleman in the village, which her grandmother was thankful for. It was not long before another man asked Keturah to dance, and then another, and another. Keturah tried to love every boy and bachelor who requested a dance, to no avail. A calmness had settled over her and she began to find no need to search for love. She found herself content with the love she already had.

Until, at the height of the festivities, John Temsland was standing before her and asked her for a dance, which she graciously accepted. They danced quietly for a moment, speaking very little before John Temsland said, “I know you think it is impossible. Even my mother is doubtful...”

“What is impossible, sir?” Keturah asked.

“Please, Keturah, say my name.” John said.

“John,” Keturah said, shyly, “I don’t understand. What is impossible?”

“I asked my mother, Keturah,” John said, very low, “how a lord’s son might go about marrying a commoner. But listen – who is the one person with the power to turn a common woman into a lady? The king! His Majesty the king, the very king who is here in Tide-by-Rood for the fair!”

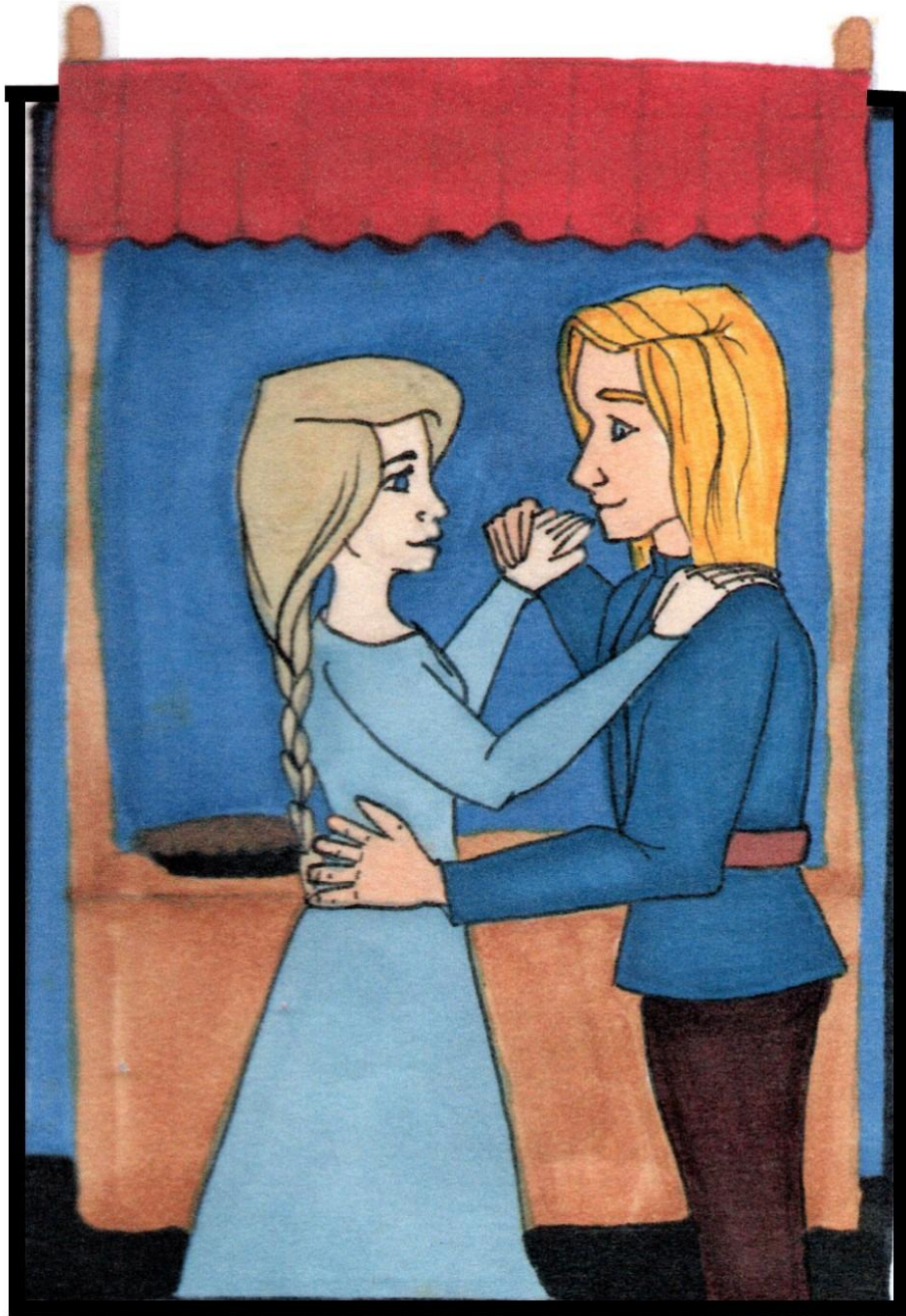
“John, what are you saying?” Keturah asked, astonished. “The king does not raise up commoners except for war heroes or wealthy merchants.”

John smiled then, adding, “and also those who he has promised to grant a wish for. Remember that the king promised to grant a wish to the one person who most pleases him at the fair? Well, that person is me! He has chosen to grant my wish!”

“What will you wish?” Keturah asked.

“For you, Ketruah. I wish for you to be a lady. *My* lady.” John admitted nobly.







Keturah felt dizzy, and stopped dancing abruptly. Was she loved by a lord's son? Could it be that John had been the one all along? Keturah looked at John then, standing before her so young and beautiful and strong, and he was in love with her. She could say yes, and ask now to be made a lady, and John would marry her. But she realized as she stood there amongst the crowd, that she was waiting for the words to come. The words that would happily accept such a proposal. She waited for the same words that would always come to her as she sat around the common fire, the same words that would begin this new story of her life. But nothing came, and the silence puzzled Keturah, it felt unreal to her.

But what was real was the sense that in this life Keturah had never quite been satisfied, had never long been at peace, had never loved or been fully loved as she longed to be. Keturah could not name what was in her then, but she knew that the cure was not anywhere around her – not in Grandmother's smiling face, nor yet in any of the booths of the fair. And even as she looked at John's golden hair and sweet eyes, she knew that the true soul-and-heart love that she searched for did not reside in the body of the man before her.

"I am honored, John," Keturah finally said, "but you cannot wish for such a thing... for I love another."

After a brief silence, and in a voice that hinted at accusation, and great pain, he answered only, "As you wish." Before turning and leaving through the crowd of dancers.

Keturah went to her grandmother then and gave her the biggest of hugs and softest of kisses, and told her that she was going home. Her grandmother worried for a moment, hoping that Keturah was not sick. But Keturah reassured her with one more kiss of the cheek and told her that she was just tired. Keturah left her grandmother and the crowd behind laughing and enjoying the festivities, and made her way home to her small cottage next to the woods.

She stepped inside for only a moment, thankful for the life she lived within its walls, before stepping back out into the garden. She looked toward her festive village, one more time, hearing the familiar sound of laughter. Until, finally, she stepped into the trees.

It was not long before Keturah found the stag standing still amidst the trees, waiting for her. When he turned to head deeper into the trees, she followed him in silence. And after a time, Keturah knew she was lost once again in Lord Temsland's forest. When the stag disappeared, Keturah sat beneath a tree and waited.

The sound of steps brought her to her feet. Death soon appearing out of the shadow of the trees before her. "And so there was no love for you?" he asked gently.

"Tell me what it is like to die," Keturah answered.

It was if he had eternity to stand beside her, and forever to listen. There was no time or motion to disturb them. Lord Death was looking at Keturah strangely the whole while. "You experience something similar every day," he said softly. "It is as familiar to you as bread and butter."

"Yes," Keturah said. "It is like every night when I fall asleep."

"No." Death said, as he reached up to tuck a stray hair behind her ear. "It is like every morning when you wake up." He search Keturah's face before adding, "But to know that is never enough. Keturah, I have abdicated my claim upon your soul. Come, I must take you home. Do you not know you have defeated me? That you have tricked my heart into loving you? Do what you will, marry whom you will, go where you will. You shall live to be a great age, and you shall not see me again until life has pressed its hand so heavily upon you that you wish to see it lift." Death stepped away from Keturah and offered her his hand to guide her home.

Keturah realized that at that moment she held her life in her own hands. But she knew that she had come too far. The forest no longer scared her, she saw how it



was more beautiful than the village. She knew what she wanted. So Keturah stood very tall before Lord Death, and said, “Sir, here is my wish: that you take me to be your wife.”

“You have determined you would marry for love,” Death said.

“And I love you,” Keturah replied.

Death seemed skeptical, “Can I believe what you say?” he asked.

“I will tell you the end of the story,” Keturah began. “The very end, the truest end there ever was. Once there was a girl who, long before she was lost in the wood, loved Lord Death.” And truly, Lord Death, in that moment, seemed to be nothing to fear, a dark and beautiful man only. So Keturah continued telling her story to Death saying that she knew she had never been truly alive until she met him, and never so happy and content with her lot until she was touched by the sorrow of him. She kissed him then and said, “You, my lord, are the ending of all true stories.”

*The End.*

A decorative flourish consisting of two symmetrical, stylized leaf-like shapes with curved, ornate edges, positioned below the text "The End."

## **KandD**

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### **Acknowledgment**

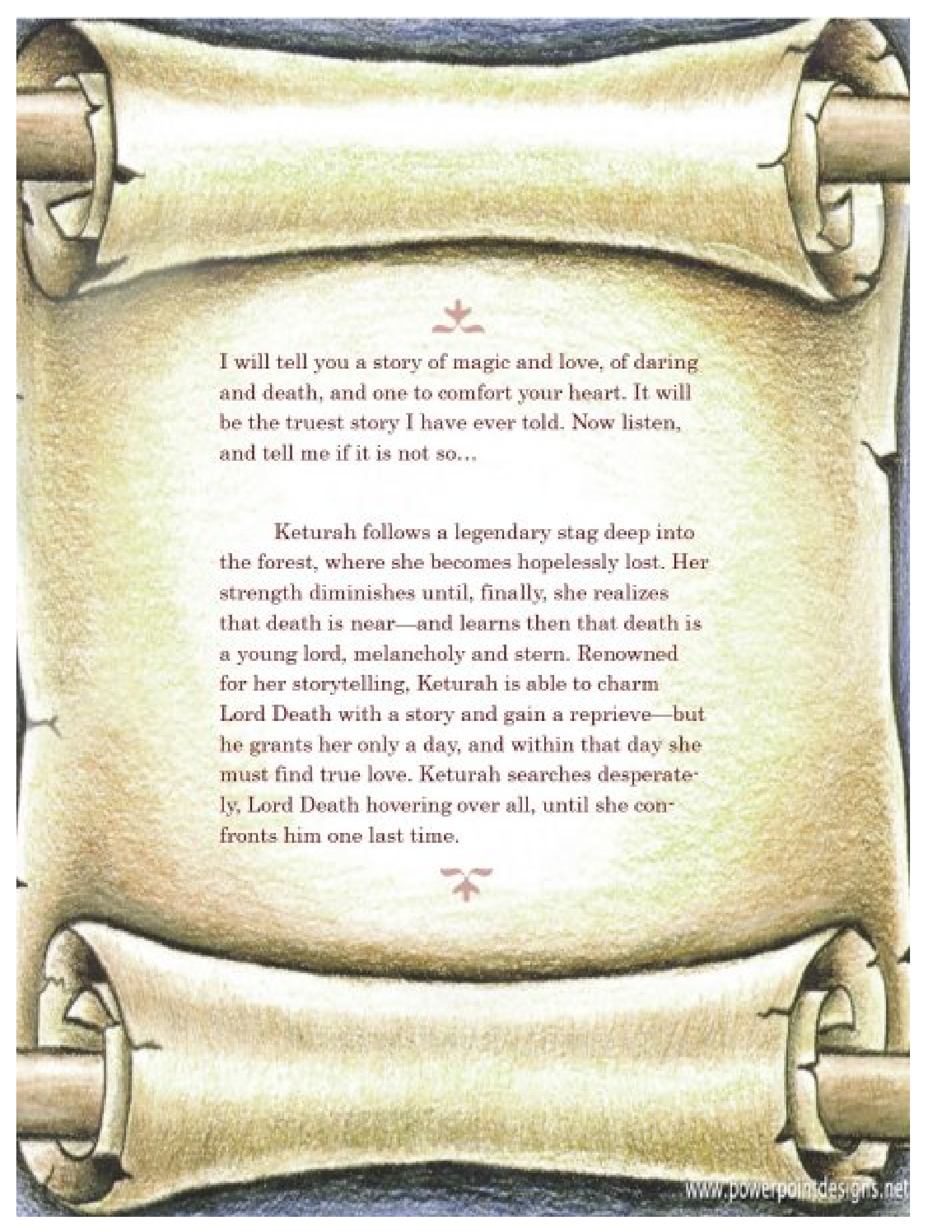
Adapted from Martine Leavitt's original novel, *Keturah and Lord Death*. Published in 2006 by Front Street; Asheville, North Carolina.

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I will tell you a story of magic and love, of daring and death, and one to comfort your heart. It will be the truest story I have ever told. Now listen, and tell me if it is not so...

Keturah follows a legendary stag deep into the forest, where she becomes hopelessly lost. Her strength diminishes until, finally, she realizes that death is near—and learns then that death is a young lord, melancholy and stern. Renowned for her storytelling, Keturah is able to charm Lord Death with a story and gain a reprieve—but he grants her only a day, and within that day she must find true love. Keturah searches desperately, Lord Death hovering over all, until she confronts him one last time.