

My Mother She Killed Me,
My Father He Ate Me

FORTY NEW FAIRY TALES



Edited by
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with
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Foreword by
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For Angela Carter

nor was I like my fictional heroine, nor was my life like hers. But "Hansel and Gretel" was, and is, "Hansel and Gretel." That is, the minute I thought about the witch in the forest, and the hapless couple, the nature of the configuration occurred to me, and I knew which fairy tale I was dealing with—if not why. All I had to do was transpose the brother and sister into a recently and already unhappily married couple. I had been listening to the Mozart trio nonstop, and so it naturally became the soundtrack played in the witch's lair. And the next thing I knew, as so often happens, Albanians popped into the story.

—FP

KEVIN BROCKMEIER



*A Day in the Life
of Half of Rumpelstiltskin*

7:45 A.M. HE SHOWERS AND DRESSES.

Half of Rumpelstiltskin awakens from a dream in which his body is a filament of straw, coiled and twined about itself so as to mimic the presence of flesh and entrails, of hands and ribs and muscles and a knotty, throbbing heart. In his dream, Half of Rumpelstiltskin is seated at a spinning wheel, his foot pumping furiously at the treadle, his body winding into gold around the spindle. He unravels top down—from the crown of his head to the unclipped edge of his big toenail—loosing a fog of dust and a moist, vegetal drizzle. When the last of him whisks from the treadle and into the air, he is gold, through and through. He lies there perfect, glinting, and altogether gone. Half of Rumpelstiltskin is the whole of the picture and nowhere in it. He is beautiful, and remunerative, and he isn't even there to see it. Half of Rumpelstiltskin has spun himself empty. There is nothing of him left.

When Half of Rumpelstiltskin awakens, there is nothing of him right. He is like a pentagram folded across its center or a tree split by lightning. He is like the left half of a slumberous mannequin, yawning and shuddering, rising from within the netlike architecture of his dreams. He is like that *exactly*. Half of Rumpelstiltskin sleeps in a

child's trundle bed. He turns down his linens and his thick, abrasive woolen blanket and hops to the bathroom.

Half of Rumpelstiltskin moves from point to point—bed to bathroom, *a to b*—in one of two ways. Either he hops on one foot, his left, or he arches his body to walk from toe to palm and palm to toe. When he hops, Half of Rumpelstiltskin lands on the flat of his foot, leaning backward to counter his momentum, which for many years pitched him straight to the floor. When he walks, Half of Rumpelstiltskin looks as might a banana with feet at both ends. Through the years, he has learned to plod and pace and shuffle, to shamble and saunter and stride. Half of Rumpelstiltskin doesn't own a car, and there's never been anyone to carry him.

In the shower, Half of Rumpelstiltskin scours himself with a bar of marbled green soap, a washcloth, and—for the skin at his extremities, as stubborn and scabrous as bark—a horsehair scrub brush. He lathers. He rinses. He dries himself with a plush cotton towel, sousing the water from his pancreas and his ligaments and the spongy marrow in the cavity of his sternum. Half of Rumpelstiltskin is the only man he knows whose forearm is a hard-to-reach place.

Outside his window, the sky is a startled blue, from horizon to horizon interrupted only by a dissipating jet trail and a bespotment of soaring birds. The jet trail is of uniform thickness all along its length, and try as he might, Half of Rumpelstiltskin can spot a jet at neither end. He runs his forefinger along the window sash, then flattens his palm against the pane. Both are warm and dry. Although it's only the beginning of March, Half of Rumpelstiltskin decides to dress lightly—a skullcap and a tawny brown slacks leg, a button-up shirt and a red canvas sneaker.

Before leaving for work, Half of Rumpelstiltskin brews a pot of coffee. He drinks it with a lump of sugar and a dash of half-and-half. The coffee bores through him like a colony of chattering termites—gnawing down the trunk of him, devouring the wood of his dreams. As he drinks, Half of Rumpelstiltskin watches a children's variety show

on public television. The monster puppets are his favorite, with their blue fur, their ravenous appetites, and their whirling eyes. The children laugh at the monsters' jokes and ask them about the alphabet, and the monsters hug the children with their two pendant arms.

9:05 A.M. He goes to work.

Half of Rumpelstiltskin works three hours every morning, until noon, standing in for missing or vandalized mannequins at a department store in a nearby strip mall. Until recently, he worked in the warehouse, processing orders, cataloging merchandise, and inspecting enormous cardboard boxes with rusted staples the size of his pinkie finger. Lately, however, a spate of mannequin thefts—the result, police suspect, of a gang initiation ritual—has left local shopping centers dispossessed of display models, and Half of Rumpelstiltskin has been transferred in to fill the void. He considers this ironic.

—You're five minutes late, his boss tells him when he arrives. Don't let it happen again.

Half of Rumpelstiltskin's boss smells of cigar smoke and seafood.

—And from now on, I expect to see you clean-shaven when you come in, he says gruffly. Nobody likes a hairy mannequin. Now get changed and get to work.

Half of Rumpelstiltskin nods in reply. God, he thinks.

Half of Rumpelstiltskin soon emerges from wardrobe wearing a junior-size vinyl jumpsuit with a zippered front and a designer label. Around his head is swathed a stocking cap several sizes too large for him. It rests heavy on his eyebrow and plunges to the small of his back in a series of broad, rambling folds. His jumpsuit, on its right side, is as flaccid as the inner tube of a flat tire. Half of Rumpelstiltskin takes his place between two cold, trendy mannequins—one slate gray with both arms halved at the elbow, its head severed as if by a huntsman's ax from right ear to left jawbone, and the other a metal figure composed of flat geometric shapes with a polished black sheen, jointed together with transparent rods to resemble the human form. Half of

Rumpelstiltskin feels himself a true and vital part of the society of mannequins. With them, he fits right in.

An adolescent with close-cropped hair, a pierced eyebrow, and a scar extending like a smile from the corner of his lip to the prominence of his cheek approaches Half of Rumpelstiltskin near the end of his shift. Half of Rumpelstiltskin stands as still as a tree in the hope that the boy will walk past, but instead he circles and draws closer, like a dog bound to him by chain. Upon reaching the platform where Half of Rumpelstiltskin stands, the boy threads his arm through the jumpsuit's empty leg and takes hold of Half of Rumpelstiltskin's spleen. He appears surprised. He removes his hand—spleenless—and sniffs it. Shrugging, he reaches again for the jumpsuit's empty cuff.

I wouldn't do that if I were you, says Half of Rumpelstiltskin, and the boy backs calmly away. He stops, crooks his neck, and looks quizzically into Half of Rumpelstiltskin's eye. Then he brushes his fingers along the underside of his jaw and flicks them past the nub of his chin. His eyes glare scornfully at Half of Rumpelstiltskin. He strides confidently away, as if nothing at all has happened. Half of Rumpelstiltskin watches him exit the building through a pair of sliding glass doors. His boss steps out from behind a carousel hung with heavy flannel shirts.

—What was that all about? he asks.

Nothing, responds Half of Rumpelstiltskin.

—No fraternization with the customers. You should know better than that.

Okay, says Half of Rumpelstiltskin.

His boss shakes his head disapprovingly and, turning to leave, mutters under his breath.

—Fool, he whispers. Meathead. Hayseed. Half-wit.

Half of Rumpelstiltskin checks his wristwatch. It's quitting time.

12:15 p.m. He eats lunch in the park.

Beside the wooden bench on which he sits is a tree stump, its hollow banked with wood pulp and a few faded soda cans. Half of Rum-

pelstiltskin can't help but wonder what has become of the tree itself. A year ago it rose within the park, housing the sky, a thousand tatters of blue, within its overspread branches. Now it is gone, and this bench is here in its place. Possibly the bench itself was once a part of the tree—hewn, perhaps, from its thicket trunk—but if so, what had become of the rest? The only certainty is that it fell, releasing from its branches a host of harried birds and vagrant squirrels, galaxies and planets and the sure and vaulting sky. With so much restless weight between its leaves, it could just as well have burst like a balloon. *When you're trying to hold the sky inside you,* thinks Half of Rumpelstiltskin, *something is bound to fail. The sky is inevitable. The sky is a foregone conclusion.* Overhead, the sun pulses behind swells of heat, wobbling like an egg yolk. The jet trail has dispersed, blown ragged by the winds of early March.

Half of Rumpelstiltskin watches as, in the distance, a kite mounts its way into the air. Beneath it, a man stands in a meadow of dry yellow grass, unspooling a length of string. He tugs at the kite and the kite tugs back, yanking the man in fits and starts through the field and toward a playground. Half of Rumpelstiltskin sees children loosed from the plate of a restless, wheeling merry-go-round, holding to its metal bars with both arms, their bodies like streamers in the air. He sees swings arcing up and down and supine parents reading newspapers and smoking cigarettes. Beside the playground, a sandwich stand sprouts from the ground like a toadstool. Half of Rumpelstiltskin's stomach churns at the sight of it, rumbling like sneakers caught in a spin cycle. He places his hand against its interior lining, finds it dry and clean and webbed like ceiling insulation. Half of Rumpelstiltskin is hungry.

At the sandwich stand, he asks for peanut butter and jelly on wheat. Eating and hopping, he unwittingly lights on an anthill. It goes scattering ahead of him in a fine particulate brume. Half of Rumpelstiltskin lowers himself to the ground and sits with his haunch on his heel. He watches as ants swarm from the razed hill: they broadcast themselves

in all directions, like bursting fireworks or ink on water. Within a matter of minutes, the tiny, volatile creatures have built a protective ring of dirt around the bore above their home. Half of Rumpelstiltskin finds the sight of creatures working as a collective a strange and unfamiliar one. It's spooky and—for some reason—a little bit sad. Half of Rumpelstiltskin has trouble enough comprehending the nature of individuality without throwing intersubjectivity into the pot. Although he has unmade anthills on many, many occasions, Half of Rumpelstiltskin has never stayed to watch the ants rebuild. As a gesture of goodwill, he leaves them that portion of his sandwich he has not yet swallowed. If they can't eat it, he thinks, perhaps they can build with it.

An abundance of drugstores lines the walk between the park and Half of Rumpelstiltskin's home, and he stops at one along the way. There he purchases a chocolate bar, a bottle of apple-green mouthwash, and a newspaper from the metroplex across the river; the headlines of which affirm what he has long held to be true—that the world tumbles its way through political conventions, economic treaties, televised sporting events, and invasive military tactics in starving third-world nations with utter indifference to the inglorious fact of his half-existence. The stock market columns report that gold is down—straw way, way down.

Half of Rumpelstiltskin has poor depth perception. Hopping home, he trips over a concrete parking block.

1:25 p.m. He receives a Mad Libs letter from his other Half.

3 March _____
(year)

Half of Rumpelstiltskin:

Not much new here in _____
(place where you are not)

The _____ Queen has decided once again to levy a whole
(term of derision)
new batch of taxes—and guess who the _____
(ironic adjective)

victims are this time around: homunculi. That's right. Miss

_____ has decided that the time is ripe to tax
(what's her name)

_____, and _____,
(things) (other things)

homunculi. And who's the only homunculus on this whole _____
(color)

? Mei Rumpel- _____
(land mass) (crude participial adjective)

stiltskin . . . Sorry. Just need to vent some of my _____ and
(bodily organ)

frustration. I should learn to control my temper—if there's a moral to this whole affair, that must be it—but you know how it gets.

_____, at least we're not as bad as
(tame interjection)

(fictional character renowned for losing his or her temper to no good end)

Life on the personal front is no _____
(word that rhymes with letter)

than on the political. I'm still out of work—the _____
(occupation)

position fell through—and I'm on the outs with

(person you and I know who used to keep me from being lonely sometimes)

Sometimes I wonder when and how it all turned so

(adjective expressing disconsolation)

When you get the chance, _____ your half of this

(word that rhymes with better)

(direction) _____ to me, so I can find out what I've

written. When the words won't come to me, I figure they must be

yours. I miss you and _____

(subject)

(verb)

(object)

(sad word)

(sad, sad, sad, sad word)

All Right:

Half of Rumpelstiltskin

2:30 p.m. He delivers a speech to a local women's auxiliary organization.

Half of Rumpelstiltskin stands at a lectern fashioned of fluted, burnished cherrywood and speaks on "The Birthrights of First-Born Children," a topic in which he claims no small degree of expertise. Half of Rumpelstiltskin has had his fair share of ill-favored dealings with first-born children, particularly those of millers' daughters. As he speaks, the cheery, preoccupied faces before him exchange knowing glances and subtle pointed smiles. Half of Rumpelstiltskin, when asked to address this meeting, was not informed as to whether the auxiliary was *for* or *against* first-born children and their concomitant birthrights—and so he has taken what he considers to be a nonpartisan slant on the topic. Listening to the raspy coughs of the women in the audience and regarding their nodding, oblate heads, he can't decide whether he is offending or boring them. Half of Rumpelstiltskin concludes his speech to a smattering of polite applause that sounds like the last few popping kernels in a bag of prebuttered popcorn. When he steps out from behind the lectern and joins the women in the audience for a question-and-answer session, nobody has a thing

to say about first-born children, birthrights, red pottage, or the nation of Israel. Instead, as he might have suspected, it's all *straw-to-gold* this and *fairy tale* that.

—What, the women ask, happened to your other half?

I split myself in two, says Half of Rumpelstiltskin, when the Queen guessed my name. However, he says, that's a story that demands a discussion of first-born children. So then—

—But, the women ask, how did you split yourself in two?

In a fit of anger, says Half of Rumpelstiltskin. When the Queen guessed my name, I stamped explosively, burying my right leg to the waist beneath the floorboards. In trying to unearth myself, I took hold of my left foot, wrenching it so hard that I split down the center. My other half lives overseas. I myself emigrated.

—I thought, say the women, that upon stamping the ground you fell to the center of the earth. Or that you merely bruised your heel and wandered off in a fit of malaise.

No, says Half of Rumpelstiltskin, *those are just myths.*

—Is it true, ask the women, that you wish to huff and puff and blow our houses down?

No, says Half of Rumpelstiltskin. *You're thinking of the Big Bad Wolf.*

—Is it true what we hear about you and the girl with the grandmother?

No. *That, too, is the Big Bad Wolf.*

—Is it true that you'd like to cook our children in your large, cast-iron stewpot?

Half of Rumpelstiltskin sighs. No, he says, *I am in fact a strict vegetarian.*

—Do you believe in the interdependence of name and identity? ask the women.

Yes, *I do.*

—Why don't you change your name?

Because I'm still Rumpelstiltskin, says Half of Rumpelstiltskin. I'm just not all of him.

—You're still Rumpelstiltskin? Even after having lived as Half, and only half, of Rumpelstiltskin for oh-so-many years?

Yes.

—Is there a moral to all of this?

No. Half of Rumpelstiltskin checks his watch. *No, there isn't. I have time for one more question.*

—If you were granted only one wish, ask the women, what would you wish for?

Half of Rumpelstiltskin doesn't miss a beat. *Bilateral symmetry,* he says.

4:10 p.m. He shops for dinner at the grocery store.

Half of Rumpelstiltskin is standing in line at the checkout counter of a supermarket, reading the cover of a tabloid newspaper upon which is pictured a pair of Siamese twins and an infant the size of a walnut—who is actually curled, in the cover photograph, next to a Rumpelstiltskin once saw when he split open a nested egg, and through his gelate, translucent skin is visible the kernel of a heart. Half of Rumpelstiltskin once saw when he split open a brain. Half of Rumpelstiltskin, inching forward in line, finds himself thinking about the responsibilities delegated to either hemisphere of the brain. If, as they say, the right half of the brain controls the left half of the body—and the left half the right—Half of Rumpelstiltskin moves and talks, yawns and dances, under the edicts of the other Half of Rumpelstiltskin's portion of Rumpelstiltskin's brain. Is it possible, Half of Rumpelstiltskin wonders, that he is somewhere across the ocean, sitting in front of a fireplace or reading a magazine, operating under the delusion that he is standing here in the supermarket, buying ingredients for his evening's meal and looking at the tabloids? That through half a world's measure of Rumpelstiltskin-lessness, he sends directives, receives impressions, down a sequence of nodes and fibers concealed within the dense, Gordian anatomy of the earth—and his other half

the same? That he is never where he thinks he is or heading where he hopes to be?

Half of Rumpelstiltskin sometimes feels absolutely and undeniably alienated from everyone and everything around him.

Asleep in the shopping cart in front of him, her head resting upon the pocked rind of a firm green cantaloupe, a baby lies beside a bag of crinkle-cut potato wedges. She is breathing softly through her nose, and her dark, wavy hair frames the pudge of her face. As the Halves of Rumpelstiltskin told the Queen when she offered the treasures of the kingdom in exchange for her first-born child, something living is more important to him than all the treasures in the world. The baby gurgles, her legs poking through the bars of the shopping cart, and pulls to her stomach a round of Gouda cheese the size of her hand. He would never have imagined, not for a heartbeat, that children were so easily come by. Had he known you could buy them at the supermarket, his life might not have become the mess it is today.

He watches as the woman in front of him purchases her groceries—potatoes and cheese; leafy vegetables and globe, pulpy fruits; several green plastic bottles of soda; a wedge of ham garnished with pineapples; and the baby—and wheels them to the parking lot. As the woman at the register of the checkout lane scans his groceries above a brilliant red scattering of light, Half of Rumpelstiltskin leafs through his wallet looking for a form of photo identification and a major credit card. On his license, he is pictured before a screen of powder blue. His head is tilted by a slim margin to the left, and looking closely he can just begin to see the white edge of his upper incisor and a sliver of cortical sponge. Half of Rumpelstiltskin was pleased to find that he was not grinning in his license photo. People who grin, he has always thought, look squirrely and eccentric, sometimes barking mad, and, on occasion, dangerous and inconsonant—as if they're trying to hide something from the world, something virulent and bitter on the surface of their tongues. People whose teeth show in license photos are most often just the eccentric sort—but never completely harmless.

Half of Rumpelstiltskin had half a mind to return his own when he found that he could spot the edge of his upper incisor.

Half of Rumpelstiltskin pays the checkout attendant. He grasps his grocery sacks by their cutting plastic grips, hefts them over his shoulder, and hops through a set of yawning, automatic doors.

5:50 p.m. He cooks supper and dances a jig.

In his kitchen sits an outsize black cauldron, like a bubble blown by the mouth of the scullery floor. It is a few heads taller than Half of Rumpelstiltskin himself, and to see over its lip he must climb to the top tread of a stepladder propped against its side. From the brim of the cauldron spumes a thick, pallid yeast, and across its pitchy interior are layers of burned and crusted food. Half of Rumpelstiltskin stands at the cutting board with a finely edged knife, dicing onions, potatoes, and peppers into small, palmate segments. He scrapes these into a tin basin, adds spices and a queer lumpy mass that he pulls from his freezer, and hops up the stepladder to dump them into the cauldron. The vegetables, pitched into the stew, churn beneath its surface, interrupting the reddish-brown paste that thickens there into a skin.

Half of Rumpelstiltskin climbs to the kitchen floor. He washes his hand in the sink, then dries it on his slacks. Half of Rumpelstiltskin is pleased by the prospect of supper. He considers himself a true gourmand.

As is his custom prior to eating, Half of Rumpelstiltskin crooks himself from toe to palm and reels around his cauldron. Sometimes he holds his ankle in his hand and hoops his way through the kitchen; sometimes he cambers at the waist, bucking from head to toe like a seesaw. Half of Rumpelstiltskin dances, and hungers, and sings his dancing and hungering song—his voice ululating like that of a hound crying for its master:

*Dancing dances, brewing feasts,
Won't restore me in the least.*

Brewing feasts and singing songs,

Nights are slow and days are long.

Lamentation! Drudgery!

Half of Rumpelstiltskin's me.

10:35 p.m. He falls asleep watching *The Dating Game*.

Half of Rumpelstiltskin grows listless after heavy meals. In the bathroom, he rasps his mossy teeth with a fibrillar plastic brush until they feel smooth against his tongue. He gargles with his apple-green mouthwash, tilting his head there-side down so as not to dribble into the cavity of his body. Half of Rumpelstiltskin urinates, watching as a pale yellow fluid courses the length of his urethra into the toilet. Afterward, he leaves the seat up.

On his way to the couch, Half of Rumpelstiltskin presses his palm against the pane of his window. It's growing chilly outside. He retrieves an elderdown quilt from the linen closet and settles in beneath it.

A man with brown hair—hair that rises above his forehead like a wave collapsing toward his crown—grins on the television. He speaks in sunny, urgent tones to a woman who looks to be about a half-bubble off-level. The woman is charged with the task of choosing a date from among three dapper men who introduce themselves as if there's something inside them gone empty without her. She asks the men a question, and they answer to a swell of applause from the studio audience. Name one word that describes the sky, says the woman. It's big, says the one man. It's wide, says another. It's inevitable, says the third. Half of Rumpelstiltskin is rooting for the third.

The people on the television seem lost. Somewhere, at some point, they forgot who they were or how to be happy. They found themselves wandering around behind the haze of their fear and desire. They stumbled into his television. The lucky ones will walk off with each other, out of his television and onto some beach beneath a soft and falling sun, heady with the confidence that they've found somebody—another voice, a pair of arms—to be happy with. Half of Rumpel-

stiltskin wishes them the best, but he knows something they don't—which perhaps they never will—something that may not even be true for them. He knows that it happens in this world that you can change in such a way as to never again be complete, that you can lose parts of who you once were—and sometimes you'll get better, but sometimes you'll never be anything more than fractional: than who you once were, a few parts hollow. He knows that sometimes what's missing isn't somebody else.

Half of Rumpelstiltskin sinks into sleep like a leaf subsiding to the floor of the moon. When next he opens his eye, the television will whisper behind a face of lambent snow.



The truth of it is that I wanted to write a *Mad Libs* story, one that put the old fill-in-the-blank template I remembered so fondly from my childhood to a use that was just as peculiar, perhaps, but more emotionally complicated. At the time, I was reading the Iona and Peter Opie edition of *The Classic Fairy Tales*, and I became intrigued by one of the variant endings of the Rumpelstiltskin story, when, after his name is discovered, he stamps his foot so hard that he wrenches himself in two.

Half a person, I thought. Half a person and therefore half a letter.

Though Rumpelstiltskin is presented as something of a villain in the original story, what he wants more than anything is a child, and this was a desire that appealed to me.

Also there was the pleasure I believed I would take in describing a man who existed without the right half of his body.

And finally I was interested in a philosophical puzzle I had heard: You're crossing the ocean on a wooden ship. One of the boards rots, so you replace it with another that you've stored in your hold. Is it still the same ship? Most people would agree that it

is. But what if, bit by bit, as you make your journey, your ship sustains more and more damage, so that by the time you reach your destination, you have substituted each piece with its counterpart, and not a single bit of it remains unreplacea? Now is it the same ship? Why or why not? How much of a thing is its pattern and how much its physical material? I was fascinated by the question of whether and for how long you could remain the same person after casting off part of your body—or, for that matter, after casting off part of your history, part of your personality, part of your life.

Thus was born "A Day in the Life of Half of Rumpelstiltskin."
It's the earliest of my stories to have seen publication, written when I was twenty-two and a senior in college.

—KB