A STORY BEFORE WE BEGIN

The Star Money

Once there was a little girl whose parents had died. She had no home and almost nothing to call her own. Someone had given her a piece of bread, and she wore what clothes she possessed. Trusting that she would find her way, she went out into the world.

On the road she met a hungry person and gave away her bread. A little further on, someone was cold, so she offered the covering from her head. Then another person needed her outer garment, and another her dress. At each meeting she surrendered what she had, until she was walking alone in the darkness with scarcely anything left.

At last she met a child who needed the little shirt she still wore. It was night, and nobody could see her. She gave that away too.

And then the stars began to fall. They came down like silver coins, and where she had been clothed in nothing, she found herself wearing fine linen. She gathered the coins and had enough to live upon.

The tale is brief. It gives little explanation of the girl's thoughts, none of the lives of those who received her gifts, and no account of the world that had left a child so poor. It leaves us with an image: a person empty-handed beneath a sky that suddenly offers something back.

OPENING REFLECTION

What are you spending to be good?

The girl gives away everything she owns. We may admire her faith and charity. We may also feel rather worried about her. Where are the adults? Who protects the child? How can anyone be expected to offer their last garment before receiving help?

Yet held symbolically, the tale might be read differently. Perhaps the garments are the identities through which we purchase belonging: the sensible child, the reliable colleague, the reasonable friend, the person who never asks for much. Perhaps the girl is relinquishing not goodness itself, but the currency through which she has been accustomed to proving that she is good.

The stars do not fall from the people who have received her gifts. They arrive from elsewhere. There is no direct transaction, and no promise that the social world will settle its accounts. Spiritually, the image may suggest grace. Group-analytically, it raises a different question: what becomes possible when a familiar position in the group loosens, and giving and receiving can be arranged in a new way?

These readings do not cancel one another. The tale might be a vision of selfless charity, a warning about self-erasure, or an invitation to imagine a different order of value. One part of its power is that it does not allow us to settle too quickly which.

We will return to the stars at the end. For now, notice what the story makes you want to defend, and what it makes you want to question.

OPENING WRITING PAUSE

The first account

What have you learnt to give in exchange for affection, approval or a place among other people? Write only as much as you wish.