

Story for performance #2  
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Once there was a garden in a dry part of the earth. The garden was tended by a young girl with bright blue eyes and corkscrew blonde curls. In the garden grew many flowers, herbs, fruits and vegetables. Chickens grazed near the garden, though seldom inside except when it came the time to clean up roots and stems of last season. Figs grew in the garden and olives; pears grew in the garden, as well as apples, sour cherries, nectarines and apricots. The blonde child who tended the garden was a sister of the apricot tree, for her mother had buried the placenta of her birth and planted the sapling with it. The tree bore deep orange fleshed fruit in the summer, sweet as honey.

But of all the things that grew in the garden the girl's favourites were the strawberries and the poppies. The strawberries slept in the cold, dry winters as their roots rested and prepared for the summer burst of fruit, acid to the tongue. When the red fruit came it was a race between the girl and the garden magpie to see who reached them first and she knew, despite her young years, that she needed to be up early to beat that bird. And so she was. At sunrise she would amble into the garden, in semi dark, before her parents awoke and sit in the strawberry patch waiting for the first rays of sun to light the ripened fruit.

Before the strawberries had come the poppies. The black and red poppies of Flanders whose life was always far too short. The child knew these poppies as the ones returning every year, without tending, to the same spot in the garden, a patch of clay soil layered with rotted straw mulch. When the wind came the poppy petals would blow off like paper, all too easily for the girl's liking for she wished they would stay longer. Sometimes the girl walked into the poppy patch so the swaying stems could brush her child knees and she would gaze down on their bright red faces with the blackened smile and think about nothing in particular.

On the other side of the garden lived the girl's godfather who had planted the poppies. Everyday the child saw her godfather in the garden as he fed the chooks and carried out the chores she could not do herself: spreading of mulch, raking of the chookyard, dusting of tomatoes. His chores varied with the seasons, just as her father's did as he set about his everyday work tending the garden with the girl and the godfather. There was nothing in the garden the child did not know about. Every plant, every hidden egg or rotting fruit was observed by she with the golden hair and blue eyes.

On the longest night of the year the child's mother prepared her for bed, bathing her in the deep tub and drying her in front of the glowing fire. The mother told

the child stories of the solstice when the sun sat at its lowest in the sky and the two worlds of light and dark were at their nearest. It was at that dark time that the spirits of the otherworld could cross for a moment into the light and the spirits of light could dance in the darkness. The mother and the father took the child into the night air so their breath was steamy and, with the godfather, lit a fire of dried branches which flared bright before burning to embers under the winter stars. When the fire had turned glowing grey the mother took the child to bed while the men sat and drank their black beer.

The child smelled like wood smoke in her bed. Her mother kissed her, stroked her hair and disappeared behind the closed door. The child drifted into sleep.

When the night was coal black and the sun lay cold in waiting, the child stirred in her bed. Beyond the room a train passed by rattling over the bridge that crossed the muddy old river at the bottom of the hill. The poppies blew from side to side like drunken soldiers in the garden and the magpie tucked its head into its feathery cloak. The branches of the apricot tree brushed against the timber boards of the girl's room. Not a soul stirred in house or garden.

The child rose from her bed like a spectre and walked sure footedly through the house and into the garden. The dry cold air bit into the flesh exposed beneath her flannel nightie as she descended the stairs. No moon was there to guide her through the crispy dewed ground until she arrived in the poppy patch. She sat down and saw all the poppies were closed for the night like so many folded moths on sticks.

As she sat, the first light of sun showed as a red curtain on the horizon. It glowed there until a single ray of gold shot out and crossed the world and landed on the face of the child. The golden ray was as cold as a blade. The child opened her eyes and heard the rooster crow the morning.

Damp and cold she returned to her bed and sheltered in the feathered quilt. The sun was tracking across the garden, lighting everything in its path. The poppies stirred one by one, responding to the growing warmth of the sun.

And so it was another day for the apricot child. Soon she would have work to do. But first she had to sleep just enough to make the day. She had no need to beat the magpie because the strawberries were still pale pink. Soon enough she would see her father and godfather in the garden while her mother made the tea.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Boris Kelly.*