

THE  
**Djinn**  
IN THE  
**Nightingale's Eye**

FIVE FAIRY STORIES



**A.S. BYATT**

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THE DJINN IN THE  
NIGHTINGALE'S EYE

FIVE FAIRY STORIES

**A.S. BYATT**

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A. S. BYATT  
**The Djinn in  
the Nightingale's Eye**

A. S. Byatt is the author of *Possession*, winner of the Booker Prize and a national bestseller. She has taught English and American literature at University College, London, and is a distinguished critic and reviewer. Her other fiction includes *The Shadow of the Sun*; *The Game*; *The Virgin in the Garden*; *Still Life*; *Sugar and Other Stories*; *Angels & Insects*; *The Matisse Stories*; and *Babel Tower*. She has also published four volumes of critical work, of which *Imagining Characters* is the most recent. She lives in London.



The Djinn in  
the Nightingale's Eye

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*Five Fairy Stories*

A . S . BYATT

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## *The Glass Coffin*

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*The Crystal Coffin*, H. J. Ford, 1892

There was once a little tailor, a good and unremarkable man, who happened to be journeying through a forest, in search of work perhaps, for in those days men travelled great distances to make a meagre living, and the services of a fine craftsman, like our hero, were less in demand than cheap and cobbling hasty work that fitted ill and lasted only briefly. He believed he should come across someone who would want his skills – he was an incurable optimist, and imagined a fortunate meeting around every corner, though how that should come about was hard to see, as he advanced farther and farther into the dark, dense trees, where even the moonlight was split into dull little needles of bluish light on the moss, not enough to see by. But he did come upon the little house that was waiting for him, in a clearing in the depths, and was cheered by the lines of yellow

light he could see between and under the shutters. He knocked boldly on the door of this house, and there was a rustling, and creaking, and the door opened a tiny crack, and there stood a little man, with a face as grey as morning ashes, and a long woolly beard the same colour.

‘I am a traveller lost in the woods,’ said the little tailor, ‘and a master craftsman, seeking work, if any is to be found.’

‘I have no need for a master craftsman,’ said the little grey man. ‘And I am afraid of thieves. You cannot come in here.’

‘If I were a thief I could have forced my way in, or crept secretly in,’ said the little tailor. ‘I am an honest tailor in need of help.’

Now behind the little man stood a great grey dog, as tall as he was, with red eyes and hot breath. And at first this beast had made a low girning, growling sound, but now he hushed his threatening, and waved his tail slowly, and the little grey man said, ‘Otto is of the opinion that you are honest. You may have a bed for the night in return for an honest evening’s work, for help with cooking and cleaning and what must be prepared in my simple home.’

So the tailor was let in, and there was a strange household. In a rocking chair stood a brilliantly coloured cockerel and his pure white wife. In the fire-corner stood a black-and-white goat, with knobby little horns and eyes like yellow glass, and on the hearth lay a very large cat, a multi-coloured, mazy-patterned brindled cat, that looked up at the little tailor with eyes like cold green jewels, with black slits for pupils. And behind the dining table was a delicate dun cow, with milky breath and a warm wet nose and enormous soft brown eyes. ‘Good morning,’ said the tailor to this company, for he believed in good manners, and the creatures were surveying him in a judging and intelligent way.

‘Food and drink you will find in the kitchen,’ said the little grey man. ‘Make us a fit supper and we will eat together.’

So the little tailor turned to, and prepared a splendid pie, from flour and meat and onions he found there, and decorated its top with beautifully formed pastry leaves and flowers, for he was a craftsman, even if he could not exercise his own craft. And whilst it was cooking he looked about him, and brought hay to the cow and goat, golden corn to the cock and hen, milk to the cat and bones and meat from his cooking to the great grey dog. And when the tailor and the little grey man were consuming the pie, whose warm smell filled the little house, the little grey man said, ‘Otto was right, you are a good and honest man, and you care for all the creatures in this place, leaving no one unattended and nothing undone. I shall give you a gift for your kindness. Which of these things will you have?’

And he laid before the tailor three things. The first was a little purse of soft leather, which clinked a little as he put it down. The second was a cooking pot, black outside, polished and gleaming inside, solid and commodious. And the third was a little glass key, wrought into a fantastic fragile shape, and glittering with all the colours of the rainbow. And the tailor looked at the watching animals for advice, and they all stared benignly back. And he thought to himself, I know about such gifts from forest people. It may be that the first is a purse which is never empty, and the second a pot which provides a wholesome meal whenever you demand one in the right way. I have heard of such things and met men who have been paid from such purses and eaten from such pots. But a glass key I never saw or heard of and cannot imagine what use it might be; it would shiver in any lock. But he desired the little glass key, because he was a craftsman, and could see that it had taken masterly skill to blow all these delicate wards and barrel, and because he did not have any idea about what it was or might do, and curiosity is a great power in men's lives. So he said to the little man, 'I will take the pretty glass key.' And the little man answered, 'You have chosen not with prudence, but with daring. The key is the key to an adventure, if you will go in search of it.'

'Why not?' replied the tailor. 'Since there is no use for my craft in this wild place, and since I have not chosen prudently.'

Then the animals came closer with their warm, milky breaths that smelled sweetly of hay and the summer, and their mild comforting gaze that was not human, and the dog lay with his heavy head on the tailor's foot, and the brindled cat sat on the arm of his chair.

'You must go out of this house,' said the litde grey man, 'and call to the West Wind, and show her your key, when she comes, and let her carry you where she will, without struggle or alarm. If you fight or question she will toss you on the thorns and it will go ill with you before you come out of there. If she will take you, you will be set down in a bare heath, on a great stone, which is made of granite and is the gate to your adventure, though it will seem to have been fixed and unmoving since the making of the world. On this stone you must lay a feather from the tail of the cockerel here, which he will willingly give you, and the door will be opened to you. You must descend without fear, or hesitation, and descend farther, and still descend; you will find that your glass key will shed light on your way if you hold it before you. In time you will come to a stone vestibule, with two doors leading to branching passages you must not follow, and a low curtained door leading on and downwards. You must not touch this curtain with your hand, but must lay on it the milk-white feather which the hen

will give you, and the curtain will be opened silently, by unseen hands, and the doors beyond it will lie open, and you may come into the hall where you shall find what you shall find.'

'Well, I will adventure,' said the little tailor, 'though I have great fear of the dark places under the earth, where there is no light of day and what is above is dense and heavy.' So the cock and the hen allowed him to take a glistening burnished black and emerald feather and a soft creamy-white feather, and he bade them all goodbye and went into the clearing, and called to the West Wind, holding up his key.

And that was a delightful and most alarming sensation, when the long, airy arms of the West Wind reached down through the trees and caught him up, and the leaves were all shivering and clattering and trembling with her passing, and the straws danced before the house and the dust rose and flew about in little earth-fountains. The trees grabbed at him with twiggy fingers as he rose up through them, lurching this way and that in the gusts, and then he felt himself held against the invisible rushing breast of the long Wind, as she hurled moaning along the sky. He rested his face against his airy pillows, and did not cry out or struggle, and the sighing song of the West Wind, full of fine rain and glancing sunshine, streaming clouds and driven starlight, netted him around and around.

She put him down as the little grey man had foretold on a huge grey granite stone, pitted and scarred and bald. He heard her whisking and wailing on her way, and he bent down and laid the cock-feather on the stone, and behold with a heavy groaning and grinding the huge stone swung up in the air and down in the earth, as though on a pivot or balance, disturbing waves of soil and heather like thick sea-water, and showing a dark, dank passage under the heather-roots and the knotty roots of the gorse. So in he went, bravely enough, thinking all the time of the thickness of rock and peat and earth over his head, and the air in that place was chill and damp and the ground underfoot was moist and sodden. He bethought him of his little key and held it up bravely before him, and it put out a little sparkling light that illumined a step at a time, silvery-pale. So he came down to the vestibule, where the three doors were, and under the sills of the two great doors light shone, warm and enticing, and the third was behind a musty leather curtain. He touched this leather, just brushing it with the tip of his soft hen-feather, and it was drawn away in angular folds like bat-wings, and beyond a little dark door lay open into a tiny hole, into which he thought he might just manage to put his shoulders. Then truly he was afraid, for his small grey friend had said nothing of this narrow little place, and he thought if he put his head in he might never come out alive.

So he looked behind himself and saw that the passage he had just come down was one of many, all wrinkled and wormy and dripping and tangled with roots, and he thought he could never find his way back so he must perforce push on and see what lay in store. It took all the courage he had to thrust his head and shoulders into the mouth of that entrance, but he closed his eyes and twisted and turned and after a time tumbled out into a great stone chamber, lit with a soft light of its own that dimmed the glitter of his shining key. It was a miracle, he thought, that the glass had not shattered in that tight struggle, but it was as clear and brittle as ever. So he looked about him, and saw three things. The first was a heap of glass bottles and flasks, all of them covered with dust and cobwebs. The second was a glass dome, the size of a man, and a little taller than our hero. And the third was a shining glass coffin, lying on a rich velvet pall on a gilded trestle. And from all these things the soft light proceeded, like the glimmering of pearls in the depth of water, like the phosphorescent light that moves of itself on the night surface of southern seas, or shines round the heaving shoals, milky-white over their silver darts, in our own dark Channel.

Well, he thought, one or all of these is my adventure. He looked at the bottles, which were many colours, red and green and blue and smoky topaz, and contained wisps and rinsings of nothing much, a sigh of smoke in one, a rocking of spirituous liquid in another. All were corked and sealed, and he was too circumspect to break the seals till he saw better where he was and what was to do.

He moved on to the dome, which you must imagine like the magic covers you have seen in your drawing-room under which dwell all sorts of brilliant little birds, as natural as life on their branches, or flights of mysterious moths and butterflies. Or maybe you have seen a crystal ball containing a tiny house which you can shake to produce a brilliant snowstorm? This dome contained a whole castle, set in a beautiful park, with trees and terraces and gardens, fishpools and climbing roses, and bright banners hanging limp in its many turrets. It was a brave and beautiful place, with innumerable windows and twisting staircases and a lawn and a swing in a tree and everything you could desire in a spacious and desirable residence, only that it was all still and tiny enough to need a magnifying glass to see the intricacies of its carvings and appurtenances. The little tailor, as I have told you, was first and foremost a craftsman, and he stared in wonder at this beautiful model and could not begin to imagine what fine tools or instruments had carved and wrought it. He dusted it a little, to marvel better, and then moved on to the glass coffin.

Have you remarked, where a fast-flowing stream comes to a little fall,

how the racing water becomes glassy smooth and under it the long fine threads of the water-weed are drawn along in its still-seeming race, trembling a little, but stretched out in the flow? So under the surface of the thick glass lay a mass of long gold threads, filling in the whole cavity of the box with their turns and tumbles, so that at first the little tailor thought he had come upon a box full of spun gold, to make cloth of gold. But then between the fronds he saw a face, the most beautiful face he could have dreamed of or imagined, a still white face, with long gold lashes on pale cheeks, and a perfect pale mouth. Her gold hair lay round her like a mantle, but where its strands crossed her face they stirred a little with her breathing, so that the tailor knew she was alive. And he knew-it is always so, after all-that the true adventure was the release of this sleeper, who would then be his grateful bride. But she was so beautiful and peaceful that he was half-loath to disturb her. He wondered how she had come there, and how long she had been there, and what her voice would be like, and a thousand other ridiculous things, whilst she breathed in and out, ruffling the gold threads of hair.

And then he saw, in the side of the smooth box, which had no visible cleft or split, but was whole like a green ice egg, a tiny keyhole. And he knew that this was the keyhole for his wondrous delicate key, and with a little sigh he put it in and waited for what should ensue. As the little key slipped into the keyhole and melted, as it seemed into the glass body of the casket, so for a moment the whole surface was perfectly closed and smooth. And then, in a very orderly way, and with a strange bell-like tinkling, the coffin broke into a collection of long icicle splinters, that rang and vanished as they touched the earth. And the sleeper opened her eyes, which were as blue as periwinkle, or the summer sky, and the little tailor, because he knew this was what he must do, bent and kissed the perfect cheek.

‘You must be the one,’ said the young woman, ‘you must be the one I have been waiting for, who must release me from enchantment. You must be the Prince.’

‘Ah no,’ said our hero, ‘there you are mistaken. I am no more-and indeed no less-than a fine craftsman, a tailor, in search of work for my hands, honest work, to keep me alive.’

Then the young woman laughed merrily, her voice strengthening after what must have been years of silence, and the whole strange cellar rang with that laughter, and the glass fragments tinkled like broken bells.

‘You shall have enough and more than enough, to keep you alive forever, if you help me out of this dark place,’ she said. ‘Do you see that

beautiful castle locked in glass?’

‘Indeed I do, and marvel at the craft with which it was made.’

‘That was no carver’s or miniaturist’s craft, but black magic, for that was the castle in which I lived, and the forests and meadows round it were mine, where I roamed freely, with my beloved brother, until the black artist came one night seeking shelter from foul weather. For you must know that I had a twin brother, as beautiful as the day, and gentle as a fawn, and wholesome as new bread and butter, whose company pleased me so much, as mine also pleased him, that we swore an oath never to marry but to live forever peacefully in the castle, and hunt and play together the livelong day. But when this stranger knocked, in a howling gale, with his wet hat and cloak pouring rainwater and his smiling mouth, my brother invited him in eagerly, and gave him meat and wine, and a bed for the night, and sang with him, and played cards, and sat by the fire, talking of the wide world and its adventures. As I was not pleased with this, and indeed a little sorrowful that my brother should take pleasure in another’s company, I went to bed early and lay listening to the West Wind howling round the turrets and after a while fell into an uneasy slumber. From this I was wakened by a strange, very beautiful twanging music, coming from all about me. I sat up, and tried to see what this might be or mean, and saw the door of my chamber slowly open and he, the stranger, came striding in, dry now, with black curly hair and a dangerous smiling face. I tried to move, but could not, it was as though a band gripped my body, and another band was tied about my face. He told me that he meant me no harm, but was a magician, who had made the music play around me, and wished to have my hand in marriage and live in my castle, with me and my brother, in peace hereafter. And I said-for I was permitted to answer-that I had no desire for marriage, but wished to live unwed and happy with my dear brother and no other. So he answered that that might not be, that he would have me whether I would or no, and that my brother was of his opinion in this matter. We shall see that, said I, and he answered unabashed, with the invisible instruments twanging and humming and jangling all over the room, “You may see it, but you must not speak about this or anything that has passed here, for I have silenced you as surely as if I had cut out your tongue.”

‘Next day I tried to warn my brother, and it was as the black artist had said. When I opened my mouth to speak on this topic it was as though my lips were sewn together with great stitches in the flesh, and my tongue would not move in my mouth. Yet I might ask to have the salt passed, or discourse of the evil weather, and so my brother, to my great chagrin,

noticed nothing, but set out blithely to go hunting with his new friend, leaving me at home to sit by the hearth, and to feel silent anguish at what might ensue. All day I sat so, and in the late afternoon, when the shadows were long on the castle lawns and the last rays of the sun were brassy and chill, I knew with certainty that something terrible had happened, and ran out of the castle, and away to the dark woods. And out of the dark woods came the black man, leading his horse on one arm, and on the other a tall grey hound with the saddest face I have ever seen on any creature. He told me my brother had suddenly gone away, and would return no more for a great and uncertain length of time and had left me, and the castle, in charge of him, the dark magician. He told me this gaily, as if it did not much matter whether I believed it or no. I said I would by no means submit to such injustice and was glad to hear my own voice steady and confident, for I feared my lips might again be sewn into silence. When I spoke great tears fell from the eyes of the grey hound, more and more, heavier and heavier. And I knew in some sort, I think, that the animal was my brother, in this meek and helpless form. Then I was angry, and said he should never come into my house, nor come near me, with my good will. And he said that I had perceived correctly, that he might do nothing without my good will which he would strive to gain, if I would allow it. And I said, this should never be, and he must never hope for it. Then he became angry, and threatened that he would silence me forever, if I would not agree. I said that without my dear brother I had little care where I was, and no one I wished to speak to. Then he said I should see whether that was so after a hundred years in a glass coffin. He made a few passes and the castle diminished and shrank, as you see it now, and he made a pass or two more and it was walled with glass as you see. And my people, the men and maidservants who came running, he confined as you see, each in a glass bottle, and finally closed me into the glass coffin in which you found me. And now, if you will have me, we will hasten from this place, before the magician returns, as he does from time to time, to see if I have relented.'

'Of course I will have you,' said the little tailor, 'for you are my promised marvel, released with my vanished glass key, and I love you dearly already. Though why you should have me, simply because I opened the glass case, is less clear to me altogether, and when, and if, you are restored to your rightful place, and your home and lands and people are again your own, I trust you will feel free to reconsider the matter, and remain, if you will, alone and unwed. For me, it is enough to have seen the extraordinary gold web of your hair, and to have touched that whitest and most delicate cheek with my lips.' And you may ask yourselves, my dear



and most innocent readers, whether he spoke there with more gentleness or cunning, since the lady set such store on giving herself of her own free will, and since also the castle with its gardens, though now measurable with pins and fine stitches and thumbnails and thimbles, were lordly and handsome enough for any man to wish to spend his days there. The beautiful lady then blushed, a warm and rosy colour in her white cheeks, and was heard to murmur that the spell was as the spell was, that a kiss received after the successful disintegration of the glass casket was a promise, as kisses are, whether received voluntarily or involuntarily. Whilst they were thus disputing, politely, the moral niceties of their interesting situation, a rushing sound was heard, and a melodious twanging, and the lady became very agitated, and said the black magician was on his way. And our hero, in his turn, felt despondent and fearful, for his little grey mentor had given him no instructions for this eventuality. Still, he thought, I must do what I can to protect the lady, to whom I owe so much, and whom I have certainly, for better, for worse, released from sleep and silence. He carried no weapon save his own sharp needles and scissors, but it occurred to him that he could make do with the slivers of glass from the broken sarcophagus. So he took up the longest and sharpest, wrapping its hilt round in his leather apron, and waited.

The black artist appeared on the threshold, wrapped in a swirling black cloak, smiling most ferociously, and the little tailor quaked and held up his splinter, thinking his foe would be bound to meet it magically, or freeze his hand in motion as he struck. But the other merely advanced, and when he came up, put out a hand to touch the lady, whereupon our hero struck with all his might at his heart, and the glass splinter entered deeply and he fell to the ground. And behold, he shrivelled and withered under their eyes, and became a small handful of grey dust and glass powder. Then the lady wept a little, and said that the tailor had now twice saved her, and was in every way worthy of her hand. And she clapped her hands together, and suddenly they all rose in the air, man, woman, house, glass flasks, heap of dust, and found themselves out on a cold hillside where stood the original little grey man with Otto the hound. And you, my sagacious readers, will have perceived and understood that Otto was the very same hound into which the young brother of the lady of the coffin had been transformed. So she fell upon his grey hairy neck, weeping bright tears. And when her tears mixed with the sally-tears that fell down the great beast's cheek, the spell was released, and he stood before her, a golden-haired young man in hunting-costume. And they embraced, for a long time, with full hearts. Meanwhile the little tailor, aided by the little grey man, had stroked the

glass case containing the castle with the two feathers from the cock and hen, and with a strange rushing and rumbling the castle appeared as it must always have been, with noble staircases and innumerable doors. Then the little tailor and the little grey man uncorked the bottles and flasks and the liquids and smokes flowed sighing out of the necks of them, and formed themselves into men and women, butler and forester, cook and parlourmaid, all mightily bewildered to find themselves where they were. Then the lady told her brother that the little tailor had rescued her from her sleep and had killed the black artist and had won her hand in marriage. And the young man said that the tailor had offered him kindness, and should live with them both in the castle and be happy ever after. And so it was, and they did live happily ever after. The young man and his sister went hunting in the wild woods, and the little tailor, whose inclination did not lie that way, stayed by the hearth and was merry with them in the evenings. Only one thing was missing. A craftsman is nothing without the exercise of his craft. So he ordered to be brought to him the finest silk cloth and brilliant threads, and made for pleasure what he had once needed to make for harsh necessity.

## *Gode's Story*

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*En pleine mer*, René Quillivic, born 1877

There was once a young sailor who had nothing but his courage and his bright eyes—but those were *very* bright—and the strength the gods gave him, which was sufficient.

He was not a good match for any girl in the village, for he was thought to be rash as well as poor, but the young girls liked to see him go by, you can believe, and they liked most particularly to see him dance, with his long, long legs and his clever feet and his laughing mouth.

And most of all one girl liked to see him, who was the miller's daughter, beautiful and stately and proud, with three deep velvet ribbons to her skirt, who would by no means let him see that she liked to see him, but looked sideways with glimpy eyes, when he was not watching. And so did many another. It is always so. Some are looked at, and some may whistle for an admiring glance till the devil pounces on them, for so the Holy Spirit

makes, crooked or straight, and naught to be done about it.

He came and went, the young man, for it was the long voyages he was drawn to, he went with the whales over the edge of the world and down to where the sea boils and the great fish move under it like drowned islands and the mermaids sing with their mirrors and their green scales and their winding hair, if tales are to be believed. He was first up the mast and sharpest with the harpoon but he made no money, for the profit was all the master's, and so he came and went.

And when he came he sat in the square and told of what he had seen, and they all listened. And the miller's daughter came, all clean and proud and proper, and he saw her listening at the edge and said he would bring her a silk ribbon from the East, if she liked. And she would not say if she liked, yes or no, but he saw that she would.

And he went again, and had the ribbon from a silk-merchant's daughter in one of those countries where the women are golden with hair like black silk, but they like to see a man dance with long, long legs, and clever feet and a laughing mouth. And he told the silk-merchant's daughter he would come again and brought back the ribbon, all laid up in a perfumed paper, and at the next village dance he gave it to the miller's daughter and said, 'Here is your ribbon.'

And her heart banged in her side, you may believe, but she mastered it, and asked coolly how much she was to pay him for it. It was a lovely ribbon, a rainbow-coloured silk ribbon, such as had never been seen in these parts.

And he was very angry at this insult to his gift, and said she must pay what it had cost her from whom he had it. And she said,

'What was that?'

And he said, 'Sleepless nights till I come again.'

And she said, 'The price is too high.'

And he said, 'The price is set, you must pay.'

And she paid, you may believe, for he saw how it was with her, and a man hurt in his pride will take what he may, and he took, for she had seen him dance, and she was all twisted and turned in her mind and herself by his pride and his dancing.

And he said, if he went away again, and found some future in any part of the world, would she wait till he came again and asked her father for her.

And she said, 'Long must I wait, and you with a woman waiting in every port, and a ribbon fluttering in every breeze on every quay, if I wait for you.'