

A *New York Times* Notable Book

# The Innkeeper's Song



# Peter S. Beagle

author of  
*The Last Unicorn*



# **INNKEEPER'S SONG**

## **Peter S. Beagle**

Published by the Penguin Group  
Penguin Books USA Inc., 375 Hudson Street,  
New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

First Printing, November, 1993 10 987654321

Copyright © Peter S. Beagle, 1993

All rights reserved Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:  
Beagle, Peter S.

The innkeeper's song : a novel / by Peter S. Beagle, p. cm.

ISBN 0-451-45288-7 I. Title.  
PS3552.E13I55 1993 813'.54—dc20 93-3800 CIP

Designed by Leonard Telesca  
Ebook Liberation Front digital back-up edition 1.0  
ePub edition 1.1 by D3516n

*FOR PADMA HEJMADI*

*at last, and for always.*

If we were simply friends, colleagues sharing an art, a language, a country sketched on restaurant tablecloths, dayenu —it would have been enough— dayenu But that we are truly married is all I know of grace .

“There came three ladies at sundown: one was as brown as bread is brown, one was black, with a sailor’s sway, and one was pale as the moon by day. The white one wore an emerald ring, the brown led a fox on a silver string, and the black one carried a rosewood cane with a sword inside, for I saw it plain.

They took my own room, they barred the door, they sang songs I never had heard before .

My cheese and mutton they did destroy, and they called for wine, and the stable boy. And once they quarreled and twice they cried— Their laughter blazed through the countryside, The ceiling shook and the plaster flew, and the fox ate my pigeons, all but two.

They rode away with the morning sun, the white like a queen, the black like a nun,  
and the brown one singing with scarlet joy, and I’ll have to get a new stable boy.”

## PROLOGUE

Once there was a village on a river in a southern country. The people who lived there grew corn and potatoes and a kind of blue-green cabbage, and a tawny climbing fruit that tasted better than it looked. All the roofs leaked in the rainy season—some more than others—and most of the children were lean, though the cows and pigs were not, but no one went very hungry in that village. There was a baker as well as a miller, which was a convenience, and just enough leisure time to inspire enough disagreement to produce two separate churches. And the bark of a certain tree, which grew only in that region, broke fevers when steeped into tea, and could be shaved and pounded to make a dye like green shadows.

In the village there were two children, a boy and a girl, born just hours apart, who grew up loving each other and were promised to marry in the spring of their eighteenth year. But the rains were long that year, and the spring was late in coming, and there was even ice on the river, which was a thing that only grandparents could recall. So when the warm weather came at last, the two lovers walked out on the little bridge below the mill, where they had not gone for almost half a year. The afternoon sun made them blink and shiver, and they talked about weaving, which was the boy's trade, and about who would not be invited to their wedding .

The girl fell into the river that day. The winter rains had rotted a long stretch of the railing where she leaned, laughing, and it crumpled under her weight and the water lunged up to her. She had time to catch her breath, but no time to scream .

Few in the village could swim, but the boy could. He was in the water before her head came to the surface, and for one moment her arm was around him, his face one last time pressed breathlessly against hers. Then a tumbling log took him away from her, and when he gained the shore she was gone. The river had swallowed her as easily as it had the little stones they had been skipping from the bridge, a life ago .

Every soul in the village turned out to hunt for her. The men took their dugouts and coracles and poled slowly back and forth across the river all that day, like sad dragonflies. The women toiled along both banks with fish nets, and all but the youngest children splashed in the shallows, chanting the rhymes all of them knew to make a drowned body float to shore. But they never found her, and when the night came they went back to their homes .

The boy stayed by the river, too numb with grieving to notice the cold, too blind with tears to know that it was too dark to see. He wept until there was nothing left of him but whimpers and twitches and a tiny, questioning sound that continued even after he finally fell asleep in the rough embrace of tree roots. He wanted to die, and indeed, weak and wet as a newborn in the night breeze, he might have had his wish before morning. But then the moon rose, and the singing began .

To this day in that village, old men and women whose greatest grandparents were warm in their cradles on that night will speak of that singing as though they themselves had wakened to the song. There was no one in the village who did not wake, no one who did not come wondering to the door—though few dared step beyond—but it is always said that each heard different music from a different quarter. The cobbler's son was the first to wake, by all accounts, dreamily certain that the hides of two marsh-goats his father had hung and scraped the day before were singing bitterly beautiful lullabies in the tanning shed. He shook the old man, who leaped up swearing that he heard the voices of his dead wife and his brother cursing him by turns like soldiers under his own window. On a hillside above the town, a shepherd roused, not to the roar of a charging sheknath, but to mocking airs of rebellion among his flock; the baker woke, not to a sound at all, but with a sweet aroma, such as his earthen ovens had never known, in his nostrils. The blacksmith, who never slept, thought he heard the terrible Moon Hunters coming for him on their pig-snouted horses, crying his name in the voices of hungry babies; while the weaver who was the young man's teacher dreamed a pattern she had never imagined before and walked, still sleeping, to her loom, where she wove until dawn, smiling with her eyes closed. It is also said that children too young to speak sat up in their cradles, crying out longingly in unknown tongues; that milkmaids

and goosegirls hurried to meet the lovers they believed were calling them in the grape arbors, and that the silent marketplace was crowded with clumsy, grizzled badgers dancing round and round on their hind legs. Stars were seen on that night that have never been seen again, as everyone who was not there remembers .

And the boy? What about the boy, crying in his cold sleep by the river? Why, he came awake with his dead love's laughter teasing and soothing him, so near that his cheek was still warm with her breath when he sat up. And what he saw, as no one else was fool enough to see, a black woman on a horse. The horse was standing in the river, up to its hocks in racing snow-water and not pleased about it, but the black woman held it motionless without effort. The boy was close enough to see that she was dressed as the fierce men of the southwestern hill country do, in shirt and leggings of rough leather, meant to surprise a sword with its stiff resistance. Yet she carried no weapon herself, save for a walking stick slung at her saddlebow. Her face was wide and high at the cheekbones, narrow at the chin, and her eyes were as golden as the moonlight on the water, and she was singing all by herself. That much is told of her; but what she truly sang, and what her true voice sounded like, even the folk of that village will never quite venture to say. Not the grown ones, at any rate; the children at their games still chant what they call The Black Woman's Rhyme, but they get smacked if their parents hear them. It runs so— Dark to daylight, stone to sky, Caterpillar, butterfly, sleeping, waking, buried, blind, come and seek me, come and find... Nonsense now, of course, but perhaps not nonsense then, for the boy watching saw the water where her horse stood grow flat and still as a midsummer frog-pond, with the moon floating like a great calm lily pad in that churning river. And presently out of that second moon his love rose up, dead and drowned and standing before the black woman with her hair dripping thickly and her wide blind eyes full of the river's darkness. The black woman never stopped singing, but she leaned down from the saddle, taking a ring from her forefinger and setting it on that of his dead love. And when she did that, the drowned girl's eyes came wondering awake, and the boy knew her and called to her. She never heeded, but held up her arms to the black woman, who lifted her up behind her onto the horse. The boy called and called—there is today, in that part of the country, a small brown-and-green bird with his name and a desperate nighttime cry

that sounds almost like “Lukassa! Lukassa !”—but all that won him was a single long look from the black woman’s golden eyes before she wheeled her horse toward the far side of the river. The boy tried to follow, but there was no strength in his body, and he fell before he even reached the water. When he could stand again, all that remained for him was a single green spark from the ring on his love’s finger, and the distant voices of two women singing together. He fell a second time then, and lay so until dawn .

But he was not asleep, nor, after some while, weeping, and when the sun began to rise, bringing a little warmth back to his arms and legs, he sat up to wipe his muddy face and consider. If he was a child still, with a child’s taste for hopeless, unbearable sorrow, yet he had also the stubborn cunning of a child in the teeth of hopelessness. Presently he rose and walked very slowly back to the village, and straight to the hut of the aunt and uncle with whom he had lived since the death of his parents and younger brother seven years before, when the plague-wind came. No one was awake; he bundled what belonged to him—a blanket, a best shirt, a second pair of shoes and a knife for cutting the little bread and cheese that he judged it fair to take. He was an honest boy, and a proud one as well, and he had never in his life taken more than his barest needs from anyone. His girl had teased him about it, called him stiff-necked, stubborn, even unkind—which he could never understand—but so he was made, and so, at eighteen years, he was .

Which made it all the more painful for him to steal the blacksmith’s little chestnut mare, the best horse in the village. He left every coin he had been saving for his wedding in her stall, and a note, and walked her softly to the river road. He looked back once, in time to see smoke rising from the chimney under which the village’s two priests lived in furious harmony. They always rose early, to have more time for quarreling, and their fire was always the first lighted. It was the last sight that boy on the stolen horse—his name was Tikat, by the way—ever had of his home.

## **THE STABLE BOY**

I was the first to see them—perhaps the very first in this country. Marinesha would have been first, but she ran off into the woods while I was still trying

to apologize. I never knew the right way to be with Marinesha. Perhaps there was none. I wonder if I would ever have learned .

Of course, I had no business on the road at that hour. It was late, past sunset, and time to bed down the horses. In justice to old Karsh, no one will ever be able to say that he treated an animal unkindly. I would leave the finest, most high-strung horse with him at any time, or a blind, useless, beloved dog, but not a child. My name, as far as I know, is Rosseth, which in our tongue means something not quite worthless, something thrown in to sweeten a bad bargain. Karsh named me .

Marinesha, now. Marinesha means scent of the morning, and I had followed that scent through both our chores all day, teasing and plaguing her—I admit it—until somehow she had half-agreed to meet me after milking by the bee tree. There are no bees there now—they all swarmed long ago—but Marinesha still calls it that. I found this as maddeningly touching as the way her hair goes back from her forehead .

Well, then. I swear I had no more than stroked that hair, not even uttered my first fumbling lie (in honesty, I had never expected her to come—she had never kept her word before) when she was gone again, skittering away through the trees like a moth, leaving nothing but her tears in my hands. I was angry at first, and then alarmed: there would be no way of slipping back to the inn before Karsh had noticed my absence, and while that fat man misses with most of his blows, the few that land land hard. So it was that I was still standing in the middle of the road, trying with all my weary wits to think of a story that, in the right mood, Karsh just might choose to believe, when I heard the three horses .

They came around the bend beyond the little spring where no one drinks, three women riding close together. One black, one brown like Marinesha (though not nearly as pretty) and one so pale that to call her “white” has no meaning. Lilies, corpses, ghosts—if these are white, then there must be another word for that woman’s skin. It seemed to me, gaping in the road, that her color was the color of something inside her, some bright, fierce life thumping and burning away with no thought at all for her body, no care or pity for it at all. Her horse was afraid of her .

The black one was a little way in the lead. She drew rein in front of me and sat silent for a moment, considering me out of long, wide eyes. If you could make gold out of smoke, you would have something like the color of those eyes. For my part, I stood like a fool, unable even to close my slack jaws. I know now how different it is elsewhere, but in the country of my birth women do not ride out unescorted, however many they be. And Lal—I learned her full name later, though never how to say it properly—Lal was the first black woman I had ever seen. Black men, yes, often, as traveling merchants and now and then a poet, rhyming for bread in the marketplace, but never a woman. I believed, with most, that there were none .

“Sunlight on your road,” I managed to greet her at last, voice had changed some years before, but you could never have told it then .

“And on yours,” the black woman answered. I say it in shame and honesty that my mouth fell open again to hear her speak my language. I would have been less astonished if she had barked or flapped her arms and screamed like a hawk. She said, “Boy, is there such a thing as an inn or a tavern in these parts?” Her own voice was low and rough, but even so the words rose and fell with the sound of small waves breaking .

“An inn,” I mumbled, “oh, aye, you mean an inn.” Lal said later that she was certain their prankish luck had brought them upon a natural, a wandering carrot. I said, “Aye, there’s a such—I mean, there’s an inn. I mean, I work there. Stable hand, Rosseth. My name.” My tongue felt like a horse-blanket in my mouth, and I bit it twice getting all those words out .

“There would be a place? For us?” She pointed at her companions and then herself, still talking carefully to an idiot .

“Yes,” I said, “oh, yes, certainly. Plenty of rooms, business is a little slow just now”—Karsh would have killed me—“plenty of empty stalls, hot mash.” Then I saw the brown woman’s saddlebag ripple and lurch and twitch open at one corner, exactly like my poor idiot mouth, and I said hot mash again, several times .

The sharp, grinning muzzle first, black nose reading the wind; then the red-brown mask and the crisp arrowhead ears. Throat and chest white gold,

shoulders—for he came out of the bag no further just then—darker than the mask, the play of muscles casting small shadows all through his fur. I have seen many foxes, most of them dead in snares, or about to be, but never a fox that rode in a saddlebag like a gamecock or a hunting shukri; and certainly never a fox that looked back at me as though it knew my name, my real name, the one I don't know. I said, "Karsh. The patron. My master. Karsh won't."

"We will see how slow business is," the black woman said. She gestured for me to mount behind one or the other of her companions, then smiled to see me stand flat-footed, frightened now for the first time and hot with shame to be so. But I was not sharing any saddle with any fox, and it was beyond me to take the least step toward that white, burning woman. Lal's smile widened, making the corners of her eyes tilt up. "With me, then," she said, and I scrambled to join her, clinging as though I had never been on a horse before. Her leather garments smelled of weariness and the sea, but under that smell was Lal's own. I said, "Three miles to the crossroad and a mile west," and I forgot Marinesha for the rest of that day.

## **THE INNKEEPER**

My name is Karsh. I am not a bad man. I am not a particularly good one, either, though honest enough in my trade. Nor am I at all brave—if I were, I would be some kind of soldier or sailor. And if I could write even such a song as that nonsense about those three women which someone has put my name to, why, then I would be a songwriter, a bard, since I would certainly be fit for nothing else. But what I am fit for is what I am, everything I am. Karsh the innkeeper. Fat Karsh .

They talk foolishness about me now, since those women were here. Since that song. Now I am all mystery, a man from nowhere; now I am indeed supposed to have been a soldier, to have traveled the world, seen terrible things, done terrible things, changed my name and my life to hide from my past. Foolishness. I am Karsh the innkeeper, like my father, like his father, and the only other country I have ever seen is the farmland around Sharan-Zek, where I was born. But I have lived here for almost forty years, and run