The Winter's Tale, Retold by Barbara Cobb

In the kingdom of Sicilia, King Leontes was privileged to have as his guest his boyhood friend, Polixenes, King of Bohemia. As was customary at that time, Polixenes had been visiting for many months, and, as much as he enjoyed his time with his best friend, there came a time when Polixenes knew that he needed to return home to his kingdom and his young son. Leontes tried to pursuade Polixenes to stay, to no avail. Then Leontes asked his wife, Hermione, to pursuade Polixenes to stay, and, whether because of the Queen's soft manners or gentleness, Polixenes agreed to stay just a little longer.

Instantly, and without either Polixenes or Hermione realizing it, Leontes succumbed to an unjustifiable jealousy and burst into an uncontrollable rage. Urged on by one of Leontes' followers, a good man named Camillo, whom Leontes had ordered to poison Polixenes, Polixenes quickly retracted his agreement to stay and sped to his ship for his return to Bohemia, and Camillo left with him, sure that his own life was at risk as well, since he had no intention of carrying out King Leontes' savage order.

Leontes confronted Hermione, who was, at this time, pregnant and almost to term. He accused her of devastating crimes, including infidelity with the now-departed Polixenes, and despite Hermione's assertions of innocence, Leontes ordered Hermione incarcerated. There, in a dungeon, Hermione gave birth to Leontes' and her baby daughter. Hermione's lady-in-waiting, Paulina, brought the baby to Leontes, who put the baby in the care of Paulina's husband, Antigonus, with the order that Antigonus kill the child. Antigonus departed immediately with the baby.

So sure of Hermione's guilt was Leontes that he had sent messengers to the Oracle at Delphi to bring back proof of her infidelity. When the messengers arrived, Hermione was brought from prison into the presence of the king, and the following proclamation from the Oracle was delivered to all: "Hermione is innocent, Polixenes blameless, Camillo a true subject, Leontes a jealous tyrant, and the king shall live without an heir if that which is lost be not found." Everyone knew the truth, and another messenger arrived to tell Leontes that his elder son, his only other child, a boy named Mamillius, had died of a broken heart. Hermione fainted, and Paulina helped her from the chamber, only to return with the news that Hermione, too, was dead.

Although Leontes' rage melted into repentence almost instantly, the harm was already done. Antigonus had taken the baby to the coastline of Bohemia, since he still wrongly believed that Polixenes was the baby's father. On the sand he placed the baby, along with a small pouch of coins, a note that identified the baby by the name, "Perdita," a name meaning "little lost one," a locket, and a regal swaddling cloth, and while doing so, he heard, and then saw, a bear, who proceeded to chase him – "Exit, pursued by a bear" – and then kill and for the most part devour him.

The massacre was witnessed in part by a young shepherd, and the baby was found by the young shepherd's father, and the two, coming together, comparing notes, and examining the pouch and the baby's belongings, determined both that the

baby was a "changeling," a child misplaced outside of his or her social status, and that they would raise the baby as their own.

At this point, imagine that fifteen or sixteen years have passed. Perdita the shepherd was now a beautiful teenager and had attracted the attention of the prince of Bohemia, Florizel, who was visiting the young woman almost every day. The king of Bohemia, Polixenes, had grown suspicious of his son's frequent ramblings in the countryside, and he and Camillo, disguised as shepherds, had ventured out to spy on Florizel. At a country festival, the two confronted Florizel, who, assuming that he was confiding in shepherds, confided to them that he was going to marry Perdita. Polixenes, tearing off his disguise, flew into a rage, disowned his son, and sped away to his palace. Camillo, seeing an opportunity to return to Sicilia, suggested to Florizel and his betrothed, Perdita, that the three of them venture to Sicilia and present themselves as Polixenes' emissaries, wishing to settle the feud between the two kings.

When Camillo, Florizel, and Perdita arrived at the court of Leontes, they were greeted with great celebration. Leontes was overjoyed at the prospect that he would be able to beg the forgiveness of his former best friend, even though the greatest of his other wrongs, the deaths of his wife, son, and daughter, could not be corrected – at least so he thought. Unbeknownst to Camillo or Florizel, back in Bohemia, the old shepherd had taken the items that he had found with the baby Perdita to King Polixenes, who had immediately recognized the origin of the items, and that the beautiful woman with whom Florizel had fallen in love was in fact a princess. Polixenes and the shepherds had sailed off in pursuit of the young lovers, and now they were at Leontes' court, revealing that "that which is lost" was "found"!

Father and daughter wept together, and so did Paulina, but for a different reason: she learned from the old shepherd that her long lost husband Antigonus had died a horrid death in the jaws of the Bohemian bear. Despite her sorrow, Paulina invited Leontes and Perdita to come to her home. She told them that she had commissioned a famous sculptor to make a statue of Hermione.

When Leontes saw the statue, he marveled at how much it resembled his beloved and wronged wife Hermione, but he noted that the sculptor seemed to have given the statue wrinkles that his Hermione had not had. Leontes announced that he would kiss the statue, and Paulina stopped him, saying that the paint that the artist had used was still wet. Leontes asserted that he was almost sure that the statue was moving and breathing. Paulina then announced that, if they thought that they could bear it, she would make the statue descend from its pedestal and take Leontes's hand. And that's just what happened – the statue was not a statue, but Hermione, whom Paulina had hidden away for sixteen years, until the Oracle's words had come true. All rejoiced, King Leontes and Queen Hermione, Prince Florizel and Princess Perdita, and, at the suggestion of Leontes, the good Camillo and the loyal Paulina, and they all lived happily ever after.