

🌸 MARIGOLD'S MOLES 🌸

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Once upon a time, there was a little girl with strawberry-blonde hair. Her name was Marigold Miller and she was born with moles all over her body. Twenty-one of them were on her face – ten on her right cheek and eleven on her left – spaced oddly and giving her an unusual appearance. In addition, there were lots of moles on her arms and on her legs that people could see. Everybody in the town of Adoration wondered about Marigold's moles, and on her fifth birthday her parents – Henry and Sheila Miller – took her to a witchdoctor for a magical reading about them. "Come inside," the witchdoctor said at the door. "My name is Thomas Jones. Tell me your names and what I can do."

Marigold's family introduced themselves, and her parents said, "Doctor, tell us about her moles. What do they mean? She's had them since birth." "Do you have some kind of payment in exchange?" Thomas asked. "A few coins, perhaps?" Henry got out his pouch and gave Thomas two silver coins. "That's fine," said Thomas. Then the witchdoctor diagnosed Marigold's moles. "They are some kind of an omen," Thomas said. "Could they mean she's charmed?" Sheila asked. "I doubt it," said the witchdoctor. "No, the omen is a bad one I think. I see creatures coming to get her – giant toads I believe. As though while asleep, they will take your daughter and her true love away somewhere else, gone forever. It will be at an early age. Together I see them dying, leaving you childless in your old age." "What should we do?" asked Henry. "There must be some solution," said Sheila. "You should have the moles burned off," Thomas informed them (albeit mistakenly). "Can you do that for us?" Henry asked. "Yes," said the witchdoctor.

Thomas gave Marigold some herbal tonic to ease the pain, and let it take effect. Then, with a hot poker over a few minutes of pain, the moles were gone. Thomas patched Marigold's wounds with curing herbal extracts and gauze and sent the family on their way. After a few weeks, the holes in her face had healed, but one could still see where the moles had been. Thus, Marigold grew up with burn wounds as badges of shame, for removing the omen she was born with. What could that omen mean, she wondered, and would the dramatic end of her life still come, despite the moles' removal? Her parents would kill any toads that they found around the gristmill, both out of fear and to protect Marigold. But the omen lingered in the background of Marigold's existence, as she struggled to get along with other people, especially now that she looked even stranger in a way.

Marigold's home was on the second floor of the family's gristmill and, as she got older, she started helping her parents with the milling. Their dwelling was at the bottom of a cliff and years before a pond had been made with dirt hauled in – load after load – to support the lower bank. Then the gristmill had been constructed, and her parents had moved in, owning some property around the location with homes that they rented to other people. After the birth of Marigold with her moles, Henry and Sheila stopped having children. As a child with burn scars, Marigold would sometimes put colored paint over her wounds to disguise them and make herself pretty. Entering adolescence, she began to wear makeup, and she became adept at making it look realistic, so other people wouldn't notice that she had scars.

The summer when Marigold had turned fifteen, a new little lady named Lavender Forester moved into town. She also had red hair, but hers was chestnut-colored. Lavender was almost the same age as Marigold, too. Her family's house was an earth and log cabin on a meadow at the edge of the Great Forest stretching north into snow-covered lands. Lavender's father, a lumberjack named Steven, lived there with her mother, a seamstress named Heather, and her older brother Kyle, who was still in school. From the back of Lavender's house, foothills climbed up toward the mountains, the nearest ridge being Stony Bluffs Mountain. At the top of Stony Bluffs Mountain was a cave where some dragons lived, and all summer the young women – Marigold and Lavender – spent time watching as those dragons flew overhead, brightly with their scales, to Stony Bluffs, the other mountains, and beyond. Sometimes, Marigold and Lavender would lie in meadows holding hands. Other times they would walk through forest trees on paths, looking up for a view when they heard the dragons screeching. Occasionally, the young women would kiss, but Marigold was always hesitant and pulled away quickly.

Then came the day of truth. "I don't really look like this, Lavender – like you think I look. I'm sorry," Marigold confessed from under her makeup. "What?" asked Lavender. Marigold explained. "I was born with moles all over my body," she said. "When I was five, my family consulted a witchdoctor named Thomas Jones about them and had the moles burned them off to forestall the omen they meant. The witchdoctor said that I'd fall in love only to be taken away by toads. What you see of my face is makeup, mostly." "Well, Marigold," said Lavender, "I've noticed that you have a lot of burn scar marks on your arms and your legs. Those are from where the moles were, I guess." Then Lavender inquired, "What do you really look like?" "Come," said Marigold, "I'll show you." Together, they went and found a stream where Marigold picked up some leaves and washed the makeup off. "Oh," said Lavender, "I see. You've got scars on your face too, like on your arms and legs, from where the witchdoctor burned you – a whole lot of scars!"

Marigold began to cry inconsolably. "Yes," she said, "I'm ugly for life. That's what you see." "Your family should have left the moles," Lavender hugged her. "I would have loved you, warts and all." With those words, Marigold went from tears into deep sobbing. "That's what these holes represent," Marigold said, touching her facial scars, "warts! I was born a frog – with birth defects – an omen of toads taking my life. I'm a shame to everybody now. Oh!" she sighed. "Who will ever love me? Nobody can love me. Nobody ever *will* love me. I'm *so* unlucky!" "I love you just fine," Lavender said. "Besides, Marigold," said Lavender, "moles really aren't birth defects; they're just different skin formations. They can be healthy too."

And with that, the secret was out. Marigold wore makeup constantly, and Lavender – while average-looking – never seemed to want any. The two friends would still watch dragons, string clover chains together, and catch crayfish for cooking, but Marigold was significantly different than she tried to look, and it always bugged Lavender some. Why couldn't life be just the way it was meant to be, and everything be okay naturally?

Lavender loved Marigold, and Marigold loved Lavender; but there was some new distance between them since the revelation. Still, the two young women's love grew as they told each other their dreams and spent most of every day together. Lavender wanted to sew quilts one day, kind of like her mother. Marigold wanted to gather roots, herbs, and natural remedies; to be an apothecary – something avant gard for her background. Together, they could be happy as a unit, and that's exactly what Lavender told Marigold. But Marigold withdrew, becoming reticent and pretentious as the school year began. It seemed the secret was too much to bear honorably, and Lavender would sometimes catch Marigold lying, seemingly for no reason at all.

"I don't care about your scars, Marigold," Lavender told her that fall, one day at school once the year had begun. "You shouldn't let looks bother you. You're pretty despite such superficial things." Marigold smiled, and it looked like under her makeup she was blushing. "Sometimes I feel like I could just lick the makeup off your face and kiss you all over; make you feel good!" said Lavender. "Kiss you and lick you! Will you marry me?" Lavender proposed. "Yes, I'll marry you, Lavender," answered Marigold. "Thank you," Lavender delighted as they sat together in the courtyard, having been released early from class. Then the bell rang to announce the end of that school day and the beginning of the students' afternoon. "Let's go to my house!" suggested Lavender. "My parents will be so excited to hear the good news that we're engaged." Holding hands, Marigold and Lavender skipped their way to the house in the meadow, where smoke was billowing up from the chimney.

"Marigold wants to marry me!" Lavender smiled to her mother on the way in. "That's wonderful, dear!" said Heather. "Have you asked her parents?" she asked. "No, not yet," answered Lavender. "I just proposed to her at school today. And she said yes! Can you believe that?" "Well, if it's all right with them it's all right with me," said her mother, "and I'm sure it's okay with your father. He's not home yet, but I'll tell him when he gets in. Steven has got some new trees to cut down, cart back, and saw up. You know how it goes in the lumberjack business."

So Marigold ran with Lavender to her family's gristmill. "Mother! Father!" Marigold shouted. "Lavender wants to marry me! Isn't that great?" "Okay, Marigold," said her father, Henry. "You two were together all summer, and I can see that you're faithful companions. I trust that you can stick together for life." But Marigold's mother was not in accord. "I don't know," said Sheila. "You've still got two more years of school and I want you to think about it. Wouldn't you both be better off with men? You're marrying off the beaten track, going the way you are – two women!" "But I love her," said Marigold, "and Lavender loves me." "My answer is no," said Sheila. "Now think about it. Besides, with those scars on your face you two might not even stay together as a couple. It's an outward appearance you've got going." "But Mother," Marigold stammered, "Lavender has already seen what I really look like. I showed her and everything! Lavender is okay with my scars and with what the witchdoctor said." Some tears descended from Marigold's eyes as she walked outside the gristmill, followed by her companion, who was also beginning to cry.

"What can we do?" they asked one another. "I really love you, Lavender," said Marigold. "I really love you too, Marigold," returned Lavender. "There must be something possible," Lavender reasoned. "I know, Lavender," said Marigold. "Let's go talk to the gypsy named Beatrice who lives just downhill."

Marigold led Lavender, descending some steps by the bank of the stream that went through the waterwheel, and on to one of her parent's rental properties where the gypsy, Beatrice, lived in a little shanty shack. Marigold knocking, the gypsy woman let them in. "Beatrice," said Marigold, "I want to introduce you to Lavender. We met last summer and have been best friends ever since. I want to marry her and she wants to marry me, but my mother disagrees." Marigold sighed. "Do you want to marry her too, Lavender?" asked Beatrice. "Yes," pleaded Lavender, "with all my heart!" Beatrice looked sternly at Marigold. "Find the Ring of Union and wear it," she said. "Touch your mother – Sheila – three times, and she will agree with your engagement."

"Where or what is the Ring of Union?" asked Marigold. "I want it now!" "I believe it's up in the dragon cave," answered the gypsy. "The dragons hoard trinkets made of precious metals, gathering them from time to time. For the dragons, it's a sort of hobby. They don't know what the ring means," said Beatrice. "Neither do they realize the significance of much that is up there in their piles of old treasure. God only knows." "You mean in the cave at the top of Stony Bluffs Mountain?" asked Lavender, continuing, "I live in a house just down below there at the bottom." "Yes," said Beatrice. "That's exactly right. The ring has a ruby in it and you will know when you see it, Marigold. Take this, Lavender," the gypsy woman said, pulling out a small sword from one of her cabinets. "It's magical and will protect you from the dragons." "Okay, I will," said Lavender. "How does it work?" she inquired. "You see," said the gypsy, "if a dragon attacks you, point the small sword at the dragon and just let it work. The small sword may fly out of your hand, but it should keep you safe. Be sure to bring it back when you're done." "Thanks," said Lavender with a bow, out of respect for her mystical knowledge, generosity, and willingness to help.

Two days later, it was the weekend. With their parents' permission for them to go on a hike, Marigold and Lavender began on their quest to find and bring back the Ring of Union for Marigold's mother. With a map, a compass, and a day's provision of food, they began to explore up toward Stony Bluffs Mountain. There was a large path that went part of the way, but at the base of a big hill where the terrain became mountainous, the path curved and went off in different directions. So the two fiancées left the path and began climbing upward through the trees, orienteering with their map and compass. The trees were a mixture of deciduous oaks and maples and of evergreen pines. Around them in autumn, colorful downpours of the deciduous, fall-weathered leaves would sometimes make them catch their breath. Other times, the two young women would forge under great pines, across the bed of needles that composed the forest floor, upward and upward, questing to obtain the Ring of Union.

Eventually, Marigold and Lavender came to a winding path that went nearly straight uphill, ascending the side of Stony Bluffs Mountain. This excited them and, a short time later, the companions had left the Great Forest behind. Now they were climbing around hairpin turns and across rock faces, wherever the path went. Marigold was still wearing her makeup and Lavender said to her, "Marigold, I want you lick the makeup off your face and kiss you all over." "Don't say that," rebutted Marigold. "It makes me self-conscious when you say that." "Okay," said Lavender as they kept going, but Lavender repeated, "I just want to lick your bad makeup off, kiss you all over, and make you feel good." "Again, I said shut up, Lavender," spoke Marigold. "Okay," said Lavender. "Okay."

At the top of the mountain, Marigold and Lavender came to the mouth of the dragon cave, where it was warmer and smelled of rotting flesh. Inside, two dragons, crawling, moved around, sweeping across the precious treasure with their tails as they went, making the shiny objects rattle and jingle. "Let's be careful, Marigold," Lavender advised, and she agreed. They could see gold and silver trinkets scattered around the floor of the cave – so many of them – and with a gasp of intuition, Marigold spotted the ring. Now if she could only get it! They waited for the right time, and one of the dragons climbed out of the cave, flying away to the north. Then Marigold and Lavender began to creep across the cave floor, slowly. But the remaining dragon spotted them and began to make its hunter move before striking. Circling around them and blocking the entrance to the cave, the dragon started snorting smoke out its nostrils, angrily.

Marigold grabbed the ring she had been looking at and found it was the correct one – the Ring of Union – putting it on her right hand as Lavender held the magic sword up to defend them both. However, the dragon continued its approach. Now with its wings flapping, the dragon went airborne for a moment and was about to pounce on the two true loves. Then something strange happened. As Lavender continued holding the sword, its blade began to glow with a reddish light, as though the weapon was still being forged, still being fired in a furnace or hammered upon an anvil. A sound began to ring out from the sword – kind of a buzzing. The buzzing made the sword's handle vibrate hard and swiftly, such that it almost knocked Lavender down.

All at once, the vibration became too much for Lavender to manage. The sword went flying out of her hand, up into the air at the dragon whose wings were flapping, and struck it right in the heart. Blood gushed everywhere and the dragon fell to the floor of the cave, dead in an instant. Then, before other dragons could return and take action against Marigold and herself, Lavender grabbed the sword Beatrice had given them and pulled it out of the dead dragon's chest. Together in a hurry, Lavender and Marigold climbed out of the dragon cave and began descending Stony Bluffs Mountain toward the Great Forest. Overhead, dragons were screeching and breathing smoke from their nostrils, catching wind that something had happened. Fiery blasts dissipated in the air as the other dragons missed Marigold and Lavender, yet unaware that Lavender's blade had killed their fellow dragon, having not returned to the cave so far.

Marigold and Lavender scrambled desperately downward until they were at the base of the climb, on the way receiving some bruises and cuts, but not many. The important thing was that they now had the Ring of Union, which Marigold was wearing in preparation to touch her mother and receive Sheila's blessing for Lavender and herself. Orienteering with their map and their compass, they found their way back to Lavender's house. "We found it!" said Lavender as the two entered. "Found what?" asked Lavender's mother, Heather. "We found the Ring of Union, Mrs. Forester!" announced Marigold, showing Heather her right hand. The ring now on her finger was gold, silver, and bronze intertwined, with cosmic symbols engraved around its circumference. Alchemical characters seemed to spell out something that she couldn't read and bronze infinity signs were wrapped going around suns and stars. Set in the middle was a big ruby, and the ruby's red sparkle seemed to glow by itself. "It's the Ring of Union," Marigold said. "Now my mother will give us her blessing." "Then go and get it, guys," said Steven. "We'll see you when you return, Lavender. Don't be out late."

With that, Marigold and Lavender left urgently for the gristmill. "Now, Mother," said Marigold when they went inside, "I'm going to pat you three times on the shoulder. Then see how you feel about Lavender and me getting married. We're in love and you can't stop it, but I think my touch will help you now that things have changed." "What do you mean?" asked Sheila. "You can't change my mind," she said. But Marigold looked at the Ring of Union. They had done it. Together with Lavender, she had climbed to the top of Stony Bluffs Mountain, dared venture into the dragon cave, and brought back the Ring of Union. Holding her hands together, Marigold prayed to heaven saying, "God, please let this work." Then she patted her mother three times and watched as Sheila's expression changed. "Yes," Sheila said, "I see. Hmm . . . Marigold, now I think you and Lavender will be very nice together. But you've got to wait till you finish school." "All right," said Marigold. She was elated; Lavender too, as they held hands and kissed. "We've got to tell Beatrice!" Lavender spoke. "All right," said Henry. "Be back shortly. We can eat supper and then Lavender can go home."

Marigold and Lavender climbed down the steps by the gristmill to the stream bank below and went to the gypsy woman's shack. With a knock, the door opened and Beatrice smiled to them, "You're back!" Looking at Marigold's hand, the gypsy said, "I see you found the Ring!" "Yes," said Lavender. "It's the Ring of Union. Mrs. Miller just gave us her permission to get married," said Lavender. "Good," said Beatrice. "See? I told you it would work," beamed the gypsy. "Right here on the Ring it says in writing, 'Then let them be wed.' "Oh!" said Marigold. "So that's what the alchemical letters mean. I didn't know." "Here's your magical sword back," said Lavender. "Did you have to use it?" asked the gypsy. "Yes, ma'am," said Lavender. "One of the dragons tried to pounce on us and I had to kill it. The small sword turned glowing red and flew out of my hand, stabbing the dragon in the heart. Then we just ran out of there."

"Good," said Beatrice. "Now, may I have the Ring of Union?" the gypsy requested. "Why?" asked Marigold. "I found it, so isn't it mine to keep?" Beatrice explained, "I want it in case someone else needs to use it. Then I can let them borrow the Ring. You'd be surprised how many times parents don't want their children to marry their true loves. Sometimes it's out of concern for money. Other times the true loves are the same gender, like you and Lavender, and that raises unhealthy concern." "Since you put it that way, of course," answered Marigold. "I hope it proves a blessing for someone else. My mother's mind won't change now, will it?" Marigold asked to be certain. "No," said Beatrice. "She's committed to the idea of you two getting wed and wishes you well." "But we still have to wait till we're out of school," spoke Marigold. "That's all right," said Beatrice. "I'll be there when you're ready." "So, you'll perform the ceremony?" they asked. "If you want me to," said the gypsy. "I just want to lick off her makeup, kiss her all over, and make her feel good," said Lavender. "That would do something unexpected," the gypsy woman indicated. "Really, you should wait till you're married for stuff like that." "Beatrice," asked Lavender, "what would it do?" "Yes, what?" Lavender chimed in. "I think you'll see," answered Beatrice. "For now let it be a surprise. You'll be happy together – that's for sure – " the gypsy told them, "for longer than you can believe." Marigold and Lavender returned for supper at the gristmill. It was mutton, potatoes, and greens. Then Lavender went home, walking and skipping, singing and whistling.

And so two years passed. Marigold and Lavender remained best of friends. They talked many long hours. They combed each other's hair. They gave each other back massages. They helped each other with homework. And they worked together during the summer at the gristmill. Finally, they graduated from school and the big day came. Marigold and Lavender, both wearing veils and white dresses, held hands and walked to an altar set up by the stream next to the gypsy woman's home, in front of a large crowd. Holding each of them by the hand, Beatrice asked, "Do you – Marigold Miller and Lavender Forester – take each other to be spiritually wedded spouses?" "Yes," the two blurted with happy excitement. "Let me explain what that means," the gypsy woman continued. You are to have each other, to hold each other, and never to forsake each other," Beatrice told them, "whether you become richer or poorer, whether you get sick or are in good health, no matter what happens. And such the case shall be, till death do you part." "If even then," said Lavender. "I believe in life after death," said Marigold. "So do I," said Lavender. "Then is it agreed?" asked the gypsy. "Do you two want to be wed?" "Yes, Beatrice, yes" Marigold and Lavender elated in agreement. At that, Beatrice took two matching rings and gave one to each bride. The rings were made of gold and silver strands braided together, and they had purple gemstones set within them. "Now, if you will," Beatrice said, "place these rings on each other's hands." So they did. "I now pronounce you marital partners for life," said the gypsy, pulling back their veils. "You may kiss." And the newlyweds did so, quite wetly.

At their reception, Beatrice gave Marigold a bouquet of lavender flowers and, likewise, she gave Lavender a bouquet of marigold flowers, symbolizing that they now belonged to one another. Henry and Sheila, Steven, Heather and Kyle were all there. "We're so happy for you," Heather told them. "Here's the key to your new home," said Sheila " – that rental cottage on the opposite side of our pond. "Oh, Mom!" applauded Marigold, "Thank you!" "Thank you very much," said Lavender, accepting the key with her partner. Dancing and chit chat ensued as they cut their cake and the sun climbed the sky.

That day, the soul-mates started their honeymoon, which they had planned to be a long camping trip in the Great Forest. Marigold and Lavender took large hiking backpacks, plenty of provisions, and a week's worth of food. Again orienteering with a map and compass, they hiked trails around Stony Bluffs Mountain and other places till they arrived at a clearing just below a waterfall, some several miles in from where they had started. This area was known as an ideal location for camping.

"Look!" said Lavender, "It's a toad!" "Oh no!" responded Marigold, "Lavender, it's the prophecy! They're coming to get us." "I don't think so," said Lavender. "Just look at it! Isn't it cute?" Marigold walked over to the toad at Lavender's feet. "Oh," she said, "a toad!" The toad was large and brown and it hopped slowly across the fallen leaves. "Come here," said Lavender, picking the toad up. "Awe, sweetie!" she said. Lavender began to stroke the toad, holding it in her hand. "Here, Marigold," she said, "you try." Fearfully, Marigold touched the toad. Then, all at once, a greenish mist seemed to come out of the toad's mouth and envelop the team. [Crunch!] [Crunch!] Tree limbs were breaking! Looking up, Marigold saw one giant toad followed by another coming to get them, with their mouths open. Lavender patted her face and said, "Come out of it!" Marigold opened her eyes. It had only been a dream, and the toad was now hopping away through the forest.

When Marigold and Lavender finally got their camp set up and their firewood gathered, Marigold still had her makeup on. So Lavender said to her with a wink, "Now it's time!" She held Marigold and began to lick. [Lick!] "I'm going to lick your" [Lick!] "bad makeup off, kiss you all over," [Kiss!] [Kiss!] "and make you feel good!" [Lick!] Slowly, but steadily, Marigold's makeup came off her face, leaving the twenty-one burn wound scars showing. "You're so pretty, Marigold," said Lavender. "Just the way you naturally are is plenty good enough for me." Marigold felt wet between her legs. "Now I'm going to kiss you all over," Lavender announced. "I'm going to kiss you too!" said Marigold. "Kiss you and lick you!" Marigold said. "Kiss and lick you all over!" echoed Lavender.

And they went at it. As the ecstasy between them heightened, the places where they kissed one another began tickling; then they began tingling. As Lavender kissed Marigold's scars, the moles reappeared. "You're pretty with moles," she said. "You are too," said Marigold. "Hey!" she remarked. "I never noticed you had moles before." "I don't," said Lavender. "Yes, you do," said Marigold. "And every time I kiss you there are more of them." "Then kiss me till I turn into a toad and hop away," advised Lavender. "You're not hopping away without me," spoke Marigold. "Then let us kiss and lick each other to death," suggested Lavender. "Okay, Lavender," said Marigold. "Till death do us part," Lavender recited. "If even then," said Marigold. "If even then," said Lavender, releasing a laugh.

As the genuine lovers reached orgasm in unison, the couple's bodies had become covered with moles. "I feel smaller now," Marigold said then. "I do too, Marigold," Lavender agreed. "Hey! What's happening?" they wondered. "It's the omen, Lavender," said Marigold. "Only it's not like I was afraid it would be," she continued. "Hey! My legs feel different," said Lavender, suddenly unable to stand. "They're amphibian legs!" she remarked, startled. "Mine are too!" said Marigold, falling down into Lavender's arms. "We're . . ." they spoke together, "turning into toads!" "I love you," said Lavender. "I love you too," Marigold concurred. In a moment, the metamorphosis was finished. They were toads. "Squeak!" said Lavender, meaning "I love you." "Squeak! Squeak! Squeak!" Marigold returned.

To a toad, the world is a vastly bigger place than to a human, and toad time passes much more slowly. It's a much more relaxed lifestyle to live, being a toad. And so they were happy. Marigold's and Lavender's parents never found out what happened to them after they disappeared that day in the Great Forest. Their tent collapsed and their backpacks were covered with falling leaves, branches, and needles, to be forgotten. But Marigold and Lavender lived many years together, licking one another, hopping through leaves and pine needles, catching bugs, hibernating for the winter, and reawakening in the spring.

Giant toads took them, their parents presumed, and they were grieved at first but healed in time. For Marigold and Lavender, every day spent alert seemed like a lifetime, and those months they were dormant seemed like the time between lives. With squeaks to each other, the lovers would communicate, and neither ever had a problem understanding what the other was saying. Finally one winter, they simultaneously sank into the Big Sleep and entered heaven, where souls are neither toads nor people. Rather, they were spirits, resting, reflecting, and preparing for future sojourns. And so it went with Marigold and Lavender, two women become toads, now in the Great Beyond.