

THE PRINCESS WHO STOOD ON HER OWN TWO FEET

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A LONG TIME AGO in a kingdom by the sea lived a Princess tall and bright as a sunflower. Whatever the royal tutors taught her, she mastered with ease. She could tally the royal treasure on her gold and silver abacus, and charm even the Wizard with her enchantments. In short, she had every gift but love, for in all the kingdom there was no suitable match for her.

So she played the zither and designed great tapestries and trained her finches to eat from her hand, for she had a way with animals.

Yet she was bored and lonely, as princesses often are, being a breed apart. Seeing her situation, the Wizard came to see her one day, a strange and elegant creature trotting along at his heels. The Princess clapped her hands in delight, for she loved anything odd.

‘What is it?’ she cried. The Wizard grimaced.

‘Who knows?’ he said. ‘It’s supposed to be something enchanted. I got it through the mail.’ The Royal Wizard looked a little shame faced. It was not the first time he had been taken in by mail-order promises.

‘It won’t turn into anything else,’ he explained. ‘It just is what it is.’

‘But what is it?’

‘They call it a dog,’ the Wizard said. ‘An Afghan hound.’

Since in this kingdom dogs had never been seen, the princess was quite delighted. When she brushed the silky, golden dog, she secretly thought it looked rather like her, with its thin aristocratic features and delicate nose. Actually, the Wizard had thought so too, but you can never be sure what a Princess will take as an insult. In any case, the Princess and the dog became constant companions. It followed her on her morning

rides and slept at the foot of her bed every night. When she talked, it watched her so attentively that she often thought it understood.

Still, a dog is a dog and not a Prince, and the Princess longed to marry. Often she sat at her window in the high tower, her embroidery idle in her aristocratic hands, and gazed down the road, dreaming of a handsome prince in flashing armor.

One summer day word came that the Prince of a neighboring kingdom wished to discuss an alliance. The royal maids confided that he was dashing and princely, and the Princess's heart leaped with joy. Eagerly she awaited the betrothal feast.

When the Prince entered the great banquet hall and cast his dark, romantic gaze upon her, the Princess nearly swooned in her chair. She sat shyly while everyone toasted the Prince and the golden Princess and peace forever between the two kingdoms. The dog watched quietly from its accustomed place at her feet.

After many leisurely courses, the great feast ended, and the troubadours began to play. The Prince and Princess listened to the lyrical songs honoring their love, and she let him hold her hand under the table—an act noted with triumphant approval by the King and Queen. The Princess was filled with happiness that such a man would love her.

At last the troubadours swung into a waltz, and it was time for the Prince and Princess to lead the dance. Her heart bursting with joy, the Princess rose to take his arm. But as she rose to her feet, a great shadow darkened the Prince's face, and he stared at her as if stricken.

'What is it?' she cried. But the Prince would not speak, and dashed from the hall.

For a long time the Princess studied her mirror that night, wondering what the Prince had seen.

'If you could talk,' she said to the dog, 'you could tell me, I know it,' for the animal's eyes were bright and intelligent. "What did I do wrong?"

The dog, in fact, *could* talk; it's just that nobody had ever asked him anything before.

'You didn't do anything,' he said. 'It's your height.'

'My height?' the Princess was more astonished by what the dog said than the fact that he said it. As an amateur wizard, she had heard of talking animals.

‘But I am a Princess!’ she wailed. ‘I’m supposed to be tall.’ For in her kingdom, all the royal family was tall, and the Princess the tallest of all, and she had thought that was the way things were supposed to be.

The dog privately marveled at her naiveté, and explained that in the world outside this kingdom, men liked to be taller than their wives.

‘But why?’ asked the Princess.

The dog struggled to explain. ‘They think if they’re not, they can’t... train falcons as well. Or something.’ Now that he thought for a moment, he didn’t know either.

‘It’s my legs,’ she muttered. ‘When we were sitting down, everything was fine. It’s these darn long legs.’ The dog cocked his head. He thought she had nice legs, and he was in a position to know. The Princess strode to the bell pull and summoned the Wizard.

‘Okay,’ she said when he arrived. ‘I know the truth.’

‘Who told you?’ the Wizard asked. Somebody was in for a bit of a stay in irons.

‘The dog.’ The Wizard sighed. In fact, he had *known* the creature was enchanted.

‘It’s my height,’ she continued bitterly. The Wizard nodded. ‘I want you to make me shorter,’ she said. ‘A foot shorter, at least, Now.’

Using all his persuasive powers, which were considerate, the Wizard explained to her that he could not possibly do that. ‘Fatter,’ he said, ‘yes. Thinner, yes. Turn you into a raven, maybe. But shorter, no. I cannot make you even an inch shorter, my dear.

The Princess was inconsolable.

Seeing her sorrow, the King sent his emissary to the neighboring kingdom with some very attractive offers. Finally the neighboring King and Queen agreed to persuade the Prince to give the match another chance. The Queen spoke to him grandly of chivalry and honor, and the King spoke to him privately of certain gambling debts.

In due course he arrived at the castle, where the Princess had taken to her canopied bed. They had a lovely romantic talk, with him at the bedside holding her hand, and the nobility, of course, standing respectfully at the foot of the bed, as such things are done. In truth, he found the Princess quite lovely when she was sitting or lying down.

‘Come on,’ he said, ‘let’s get some fresh air. We’ll go riding.’ He had in mind a certain dragon in these parts, against whom he might display his talents. And so the Prince strode and the Princess slouched to the stables.

On a horse, as in a chair, the Princess was no taller than he, so they cantered along happily. Seeing an attractive hedge ahead, the Prince urged his mount into a gallop and sailed the hedge proudly. He turned to see her appreciation, only to find the Princess doing the same, and holding her seat quite gracefully. Truthfully, he felt like leaving again.

‘Didn’t anyone ever tell you,’ he said coldly, ‘that ladies ride sidesaddle?’ Well, of course they had, but the Princess always thought that was silly, unbalanced position that took all the fun out of riding. Now she apologized prettily and swung her legs around.

At length the Prince hurdled another fence, even more dashing than before, and turned to see the Princess attempting to do the same thing. But riding sidesaddle, she did not have a sure seat, and tumbled to the ground.

‘Girls shouldn’t jump,’ the Prince told the air, as he helped her up.

But on her feet, she was again a head taller than he. She saw the dim displeasure in his eyes. Then, with truly royal impulsiveness, she made a decision to sacrifice for love. She crumpled to the ground.

‘My legs,’ she said. ‘I can’t stand.’ The Prince swelled with pride, picked her up, and carried her back to the castle.

There the Royal Physician, the Wizard, and even the Witch examined her legs, with the nobility in attendance.

She was given infusions and teas and herbs and packs, but nothing worked. She simply could not stand.

‘When there is nothing wrong but foolishness,’ the Witch muttered, ‘you can’t fix it.’ and she left. She had no patience with lovesickness.

The Prince lingered on day after day, as a guest of the King, while the Princess grew well and happy, although she did not stand. Carried to the window seat, she would sit happily and watch him stride around the room, describing his chivalric exploits, and she would sigh with contentment. The loss of the use of her legs seemed a small price to pay for such a man. The dog observed her without comment.

Since she was often idle now, the Princess practiced witty and amusing sayings. She meant only to please the Prince, but he turned on her after one particularly subtle and clever remark and said sharply, ‘Haven’t you ever heard that women should be seen and not heard?’

The Princess sank into thought. She didn’t quite understand the saying, but she sensed that it was somehow like her tallness. For just as he preferred her sitting, not standing, he seemed more pleased when she listened, and more remote when she talked.

The next day when the Prince came to her chambers he found the royal entourage gathered around her bed.

‘What’s the matter?’ he asked. They told him the Princess could not speak, not for herbs or infusions or magic spells. And the Prince sat by the bed and held her hand and spoke to her gently, and she was given a slate to write her desires. All went well for several days. But the Prince was not a great reader, so she put the slate aside, and made conversation with only her eyes and her smile. The Prince told her daily how lovely she was, and then he occupied himself with princely pastimes. Much of the time her only companion was the dog.

One morning the Prince came to see her before he went hunting. His eyes fixed with disgust on the dog, who lay comfortable over her feet.

‘Really,’ the Prince said, ‘sometimes you surprise me.’ He went to strike the dog from the bed, but the Princess stayed his hand. He looked at her in amazement.

That night the Princess lay sleepless in the moonlight, and at last, hearing the castle fall silent, and knowing that nobody would catch her talking, she whispered to the dog, ‘I don’t know what I would do without you.’

‘You’d better get used to the idea,’ said the dog. ‘The Prince doesn’t like me.’

‘He will never take you away.’ The Princess hugged the dog fiercely. The dog looked at her skeptically and gave a little doggy cough.

‘He took everything else away,’ he said.

‘No,’ she said. ‘I did that. I made myself. . . someone he could love.’

‘I love you, too,’ the dog said.

‘Of course you do.’ She scratched his ears.

‘And,’ said the dog, ‘I loved you *then*.’ The Princess lay a long time thinking before she finally slept.

The next morning the Prince strode in more handsome and dashing than ever, although, oddly enough, the Princess could have sworn he was getting shorter.

As he leaned down to kiss her, his smile disappeared. She frowned a question at him: What's the matter?

'You've still got that thing,' he said, pointing to the dog. The Princess grabbed her slate.

'He is all I have,' she wrote hastily. The lady-in-waiting read it to the Prince.

'You have *me*,' the Prince said, his chin high. 'I believe you love that smelly thing more than you love me.' He strode (he never walked any other way) to the door.

'I *was* going to talk to you about the wedding feast,' he said, as he left. 'But now, never mind!'

The Princess wept softly and copiously, and the dog licked a tear from her trembling hand.

'What does he *want*?' she asked the dog.

'Roast dog for the wedding feast, I'd imagine,' he said. The Princess cried out in horror.

'Oh, not literally,' the dog said. 'But it follows.' And he would say no more.

At last the Princess called the Wizard and wrote on her slate what the dog had said. The Wizard sighed. How awkward. Talking animals were always so frank. He hemmed and hawed until the Princess glared to remind him that Wizards are paid by royalty to advise and interpret—not to sigh.

'All right,' he said at last. 'Things always come in threes. Everything.'

The Princess looked at him blankly.

'Wishes always come in threes,' the Wizard said. 'And sacrifices, too. So far, you've given up walking. You've given up speech. One more to go.'

'Why does he want me to give up the dog?' she wrote.

The Wizard looked sorrowfully at her from under his bushy brows.

'Because you love it,' he said.

'But that takes nothing from him!' she scribbled. The Wizard smiled, thinking that the same thing could be said of her height and her speech.

'If you could convince him of that, my dear,' he said, 'you would be more skilled in magic than I.'

When he was gone, the Princess reached for her cards and cast her own fortune, muttering to herself. The dog watched bright eyed as the wands of growth were covered by the swords of discord. When the ace of swords fell, the Princess gasped. The dog put a delicate paw on the card.

‘You poor dumb thing,’ she said, for it is hard to think of a dog any other way, whether it talks or not. ‘You don’t understand. That is death on a horse. Death to my love.’

‘His banner is the white rose,’ said the dog, looking at the card intently. ‘He is also rebirth.’ They heard the Prince’s striding step outside the door.

‘Quick,’ the Princess said. ‘Under the bed.’ The dog’s large brown eyes spoke volumes, but he flattened and slid under the bed. And the Prince’s visit was surprisingly jolly.

After some time the Prince looked around with imitation surprise. ‘Something’s missing,’ he said. ‘I know. It’s that creature of yours. You know, I think I was allergic to it. I feel much better now that it’s gone.’ He thumped his chest to show how clear it was. The Princess grabbed her slate, wrote furiously, and thrust it at the Royal Physician.

‘“He loved me,”’ the Royal Physician read aloud.

‘Not as I love you,’ the Prince said earnestly. The Princess gestured impatiently for the reading to continue.

‘That’s not all she wrote,’ the Royal Physician said. ‘It says, ‘“The dog loved me *then*.”’

When everyone was gone, the dog crept out to find the Princess installed at her window seat thinking furiously.

‘If I am to keep you,’ she said to him. ‘We shall have to disenchant you with the spells book.’ The dog smiled, or seemed to. She cast dice, she drew pentagrams, she crossed rowan twigs and chanted every incantation in the index. Nothing worked. The dog was still a dog, silken, elegant, and seeming to grin in the heat. Finally the Princess clapped shut the last book and sank back.

‘Nothing works,’ she said. ‘I don’t know what we shall do. Meanwhile, when you hear anyone coming, hide in the cupboard or beneath the bed.’

‘You’re putting off the inevitable,’ the dog told her sadly.

‘I’ll think of something,’ she said. But she couldn’t.

At last it was the eve of her wedding day. While the rest of the castle buzzed with excitement, the Princess sat mute in her despair.

‘I can’t give you up and I can’t take you!’ she wailed. And the dog saw that she was feeling grave pain.

‘Sometimes,’ the dog said, looking beyond her shoulder, ‘sometimes one must give up everything for love.’ The Princess’s lip trembled and she looked away.

‘What will I do?’ she cried again. The dog did not answer. She turned toward him and then fell to her knees in shock, for the dog lay motionless on the floor. For hours she sat weeping at his side, holding his lifeless paw.

At last she went to her cupboard and took out her wedding dress, which was of the softest whitest velvet. She wrapped the dog in its folds and picked him up gently.

Through the halls of the castle the Princess walked, and the nobility and chambermaids and royal bishops stopped in their busy preparations to watch her, for the Princess had not walked now for many months. To their astonished faces she said, ‘I am going to bury the one who really loved me.’

On the steps of the castle she met the Prince, who was just dismounting and calling out jovial hearty things to his companions. So surprised was he to see her walking that he lost his footing and tumbled to the ground. She paused briefly to look down at him, held the dog closer to her body, and walked on. The Prince got up and went after her.

‘What’s going on here?’ he asked. ‘What are you doing? Isn’t that your wedding dress?’ She turned so he could see the dog’s head where it nestled in her left arm.

‘I thought you got rid of that thing weeks ago,’ the Prince said. It was difficult for him to find an emotion suitable to this complex situation. He tried feeling hurt.

‘What you call “this thing,”’ the Princess said, ‘died to spare me pain. And I intend to bury him with honor.’ The Prince only half-heard her, for he was struck by another realization.

‘You’re talking!’

‘Yes.’ She smiled.

Looking down at him, she said, ‘I’m talking. The better to tell you good-bye. So good-bye.’ And off she went. She could stride too, when she wanted to.

‘Well, my dear,’ the Queen said that night, when the Princess appeared in the throne room. ‘You’ve made a proper mess of things. We have alliances to think of. I’m

sure you're aware of the very complex negotiations you have quite ruined. Your duty as a Princess...'

'It is not necessarily my duty to sacrifice everything,' the Princess interrupted. 'And I have other duties: a Princess says what she thinks. A Princess stands on her own two feet. A Princess stands tall. And she does not betray those who love her.' Her royal parents did not reply. But they seemed to ponder her words.

The Princess lay awake that night for many hours. She was tired from the day's exertions, for she let no other hand dig the dog's grave or fill it, but she could not sleep without the warm weight of the dog across her feet, and the sound of his gentle breathing. At last she put on her cloak and slippers and stole through the silent castle out to the graveside. There she mused upon love, and what she had given for love, and what the dog had given.

'How foolish we are,' she said aloud. 'For a stupid Prince I let my wise companion die.'

At last the Princess dried her tears on her hem and stirred herself to examine the white rose she had planted on the dog's grave. She watered it again with her little silver watering can. It looked as though it would live.

As she slipped into the castle through the ornamental gardens, she heard a quiet jingling near the gate. On the bridge there was silhouetted a horseman. The delicate silver bridles of his horse sparkled in the moonlight. She could see his crested shield that he must be nobility, perhaps a Prince. Well, there was many an empty room in the castle tonight, with the wedding feast canceled and all the guest gone home. She approached the rider.

He was quite an attractive fellow, thin with silky golden hair. She smiled up at him, admiring his lean and elegant hand on the reins.

'Where have you come from?' she asked.

He looked puzzled. 'Truthfully,' he replied, 'I can't remember. I know I have traveled a long dark road, but that is all I know.' He gave an odd little cough.

The Princess looked past him, where the road was bright in the moonlight.

'I see,' she said slowly. 'And what is your banner?' For she could not quite decipher it waving above him. He moved it down. A white rose on a black background.

'Death,' she breathed.

‘No, no,’ he said, smiling. ‘Rebirth. And for that, a death is sometimes necessary.’ He dismounted and bent to kiss the Princess’s hand. She breathed a tiny prayer as he straightened up, but it was not answered. Indeed, he was several inches shorter than she was. The Princess straightened her spine.

‘It is a pleasure to look up to a proud and beautiful lady,’ the young Prince said, and his large brown eyes spoke volumes. The Princess blushed.

‘We’re still holding hands,’ she said foolishly. The elegant Prince smiled, and kept hold of her hand, and they went toward the castle.

In the shadows the Wizard watched them benignly until they were out of sight. Then he turned to the fluffy black cat at his feet.

‘Well, Mirabelle,’ he said. ‘One never knows the ways of enchantments.’ The cat left off from licking one shoulder for a moment and regarded him, but said nothing. Mirabelle never had been much of a conversationalist.

‘Ah, well,’ the Wizard said. ‘I gather from all this—I shall make a note—that sometimes one must sacrifice for love.’

Mirabelle looked intently at the Wizard. ‘On the other hand,’ the cat said at last, ‘sometimes one must *refuse* to sacrifice.’

‘Worth saying,’ said the Wizard approvingly. ‘And true. True.’ And then, because he had a weakness for talking animals, he took Mirabelle home for an extra dish of cream.