

## A Teller of Tales

Once upon a time, whilst everyone was sitting comfortably, a teller of tales took a deep breath, and started to speak. "There was once a Princess", he said, in his deep voice, trained to travel to the far reaches of both great halls and woodland campfires. He was a good story-teller, able to lure his audience in so he could play with their emotions, stretching them out until they felt they would break, before carefully allowing them to wind down and settle back into almost-but-not-quite the same pattern they were in before he made his magic work.

Most story-tellers he knew were good. They could remember many great tales, and tell them in a way that the audience loved, over and over. He knew that many people like their stories to be told identically, word for word, and that they derive a specific kind of comfort from this simple repetition. He had no argument with this skill, and these expectations. But in his heart he knew also the dangers of such stories.

An essential part of the art of telling stories is the need to make them up as you go, mixed with the fear that everything could unravel, which could result in a loss of payment and reputation. But he also knew that a story too often simply repeated would lose its meaning and relevance. He feared above all the loss of the power of story-telling, because that would mean the loss of communities, and the loss of the ties that bind people together through shared dreams and experiences.

He liked the places where they expected new stories, or stories retold in different ways. These were usually newer communities, that had broken away from more established places. Their newness included uncertainty, so they appreciated stories with a degree of peril, as long as they usually had a positive conclusion, and some hope.

This satisfied the story-teller, because he knew how hard and contradictory life could be, how it could hit you from behind and lay you down when you least expected. And he also knew the delight of love at first sight, and the pleasures and terrors of marriage and children. The people in new settlements understood this well, and gained great satisfaction in the risks taken for good causes, and the sorrow when fate deals a hard hand. But they also understood the need to start again, and to push back against the darkness.

There are different types of story-tellers. Some are skilled in reassuring the fearful, some help to unify or encourage bravery or wisdom. The best story-tellers can reassure whilst at the same time subtly stiffen the resolve, or tell a story full of peril in a way that always promises a good resolution. And they will always find ways to challenge their audiences, as well as satisfying their desire for certainty.

"There was once a Princess", he began. "Who was beautiful, of course, and clever. She had persuaded her father the King to allow her to sit in on the lessons provided for her brother the Prince, and had in truth applied herself much harder to these lessons than he did. She was praised in all the country around, as much for her learning and quick intelligence as for her beauty. Everyone knows, of course, that a Princess must always be praised for her beauty, even if she is less well-endowed in this area, and no courtier or merchant, appearing

at Court, would ever fail to be awed by the glory of the sight of any Princess, although, in truth, they would more likely be dazzled by the richness of her clothes and jewellery than the allure of her face. In this case, Princess Louise needed no finery, and her simple appearance, alongside her eager interest in the business at hand, would produce genuine and spontaneous admiration from all around.

“And yet,” the story-teller paused, whilst looking into the faces of his audience. “Princess Louise was not happy. You might wonder, not whether a Princess should have any expectation of happiness, because of her position and wealth, but how someone with such intelligence and beauty should be greedy enough to want happiness too. Surely there should be some redistribution of luck in this life. Surely you can’t expect to be a Princess, and clever, and then ask for happiness too! Little did they know that Princess Louise, in the deepest, secretest depths of her heart, would have exchanged all her worldly privileges just for the opportunity to be ordinary and able to work hard for the benefit of others.”

“She dreamed of becoming a doctor. She had watched the Court Physicians go about their business, and she felt in her bones that they knew less than they should about most of the ailments they had to treat, and she believed, through her reading, that there were better treatments available with a little hard work and application. And of course, it would be necessary to travel far and wide to study different medical practices and procedures, and thereby select the best treatments, so that people could be brought back to health.”

“Princess Louise was unhappy because she knew that she would never be able to pursue this dream, because of the accident of her birth, and the duties that would be imposed on her to marry and become the wife of some Prince in another country. She understood that nobody in her family would be able to help her to achieve her dreams, and she loved her family too much to hurt them by running away or using some spell to fake her death. She was at her wits’ end. Her unhappiness became slowly etched on her face, and it was remarked on by many at Court, until it came to the attention of her parents, the King and Queen.”

The story-teller paused, and took a sip of water to prevent his mouth from drying out. He knew that everyone would be wondering how on earth this dilemma would be solved, because the situation was surely impossible. He could see the irritation of the jealous, angry that someone with so many privileges could possibly not be happy. He could see the unfulfilled hoping fervently for a way to achieve her ambitions, and he could see some who didn’t care. There were always people who weren’t caught up, because stories just didn’t work for them. But they were few, and they were used to taking part, even though it meant little to them.

There was no problem with the audience. The problem was that the story-teller himself had no idea how he was going to finish the story he had started. He had looked up and seen the Royal Family, seated at the back. There were the King and the Queen, and their handsome son, who was bored, looking around at all the women in the audience. And there was a Princess, who was the very image of the Princess in his story, Princess Louise. She was sitting forwards, hanging on his every word, her eyes boring into his. Now he had seen her,

and he could see the anguish in those beautiful eyes, and he was afraid, because he knew that he couldn't disappoint her with the ending he had planned.

He took a deep breath, and another sip of water, and closed his eyes for a moment before starting again. "The King was a generous and thoughtful man. He knew his daughter's abilities, and he grieved for her, because he could see no way for her to escape her fate, and, indeed, he had once had dreams of his own. After reviewing the qualities of all the Princes in the nearby kingdoms, he knew that none of them were the equal of his daughter, and he had no answers, until an itinerant story teller happened to arrive at Court, and told a story quite different to those that anyone had heard before."

This was such a risk. He could feel the sweat trickling down the groove between his shoulder blades. But he was committed now. "The story-teller told a tale of a King, who was reluctant to give his daughter to someone who would not make her happy, so he decreed that anyone would be able to come to the Court and tell a story, in a grand story-telling competition and celebration. Whosoever told the very best story would have the freedom to choose the Princess's future." He looked up at this moment, and saw the Princess react, her eyes becoming calculating, and he gave her the smallest hint of a nod of recognition.

He finished with a handsome young story-teller making up such brilliant stories that the Princess fell in love with him, and it ended with the two of them living happily ever after. The audience were happy, he was given money and food and drink, and he was well-satisfied. He was particularly pleased when the Princess herself thanked him for such an enjoyable and instructive story. Her father the King was also very thoughtful.

The next morning the story-teller went on his way. Several months later, returning to the kingdom, he heard the news that the King had held a story-telling competition, just as he had invented it. And a mystery masked story-teller had amazed everybody with wonderful tales that nobody could compete with. When the winner was announced, the Princess had revealed herself, and chose her own future.

"I must find out where she went, and follow her career", thought the story teller, as he went on his way, with a smile on his face.