

The Woman With Stars on Her Dress - an analytic tale



nce upon a time in a far away land, there lived a king and a queen. Long ago, theirs had been a prosperous kingdom, but they fell on hard times and their fortunes were much diminished. During the Great War, the King was gone, leaving the Queen to rule the kingdom. The King returned to find the kingdom in a sorry state and a Queen reluctant to step aside to let him rule once more. The King, pondering the problem, thought the answer to their unhappiness and bad fortunes might lie in having a child, preferably a fine princess whom they could marry to a prosperous prince, thereby improving their own lot. The Queen was not so interested in having a child to take up her time, particularly a princess. But she had noticed the King's restlessness and, fearing he would abandon the kingdom and her, she agreed and soon a princess was born.

There was great rejoicing in the kingdom when the Princess was born. The King was happy and adored his beautiful daughter. All the grandparents were happy. And the Queen was ... well, she was not so happy.

As the years went by and the little Princess grew, the King found much pleasure in her company and delighted in everything she did. The Queen envied the attention her child received and each year became more unhappy.

Night after night, the Queen sat in darkness calling upon all the black magic she knew to find just the right way to make the King and his mewling daughter suffer. At last, she settled on a plan that sent her hardened heart into spasms of dark delight. For days she collected herbs and foul smelling plants and steeped them into a dank and gruesome looking brew. She boiled and filtered and refined her nasty potion and finally produced a dark liquid that looked and smelled just like the coffee that the King drank in such copious amounts each morning. When the time was just right, she filled his cup with the brew and sweetly urged him to drink it down, which he did gratefully.

In a flash, the King's face became distorted and his body writhed with pain. He fell to the ground clutching his neck and lay there twitching and moaning. Then a terrible change began. His arms and legs began to shrink and change shape. His hands and feet turned into claws. His neck became one with his body, which tapered to a long tail while his head grew long and pointed. His skin developed scales and turned a ghastly olive-green and orange. His eyes turned beady black and his mouth filled with tiny knife-like teeth. In just a few moments, it was over. The handsome King was now a dreadful looking lizard.

Just before the transformation was complete, the wicked Queen laughed and whispered to her hapless husband that he was now the Lizard King. Only if his daughter would sacrifice her own life to live the Lizard King's bidding could the spell be broken. Until then, he would live as the cruel, cold Lizard King.

Life with the wicked Queen and the Lizard King was very hard for the Princess. She wanted desperately to break the spell binding her father. She was willing to do anything to help him. She gave herself over completely to the King and his Queen. She did as she was bid, but nothing that she did was ever satisfactory, no sacrifice ever sufficient, no performance ever good enough. When she danced, she was too clumsy. When she sang, she sang off key or too softly or the wrong part. When she studied, she failed to learn everything. Her hair was always too long or too short or too curly or too straight. She was always too fat and never pretty enough. She worked from morning to night year after year in everything she did to try to please the Lizard and his queen, hoping her beloved father would be released if only she could do well enough in her efforts to please the Queen.

The Queen Mother, grandmother to the Princess, saw what her daughter had done. She was saddened as she watched the Princess try to please the unappeasable Lizard King and his wife. She wished to take her from them to a safe place, but she was powerless against the dark strength of the wicked Queen. Fearing that the Queen would keep the Princess from her should she openly encourage her, the old Queen took to telling the Princess stories about another time and a kingdom ruled by a powerful and loving Queen whose kingdom had been overthrown by the lizard people forcing the Good Queen and her people into exile.

The young Princess listened with rapt attention to the tales her grandmother told. As she grew, she often thought of the stories and sometimes dreamed of a faraway place where a woman with stars on her dress would take her and care for her and be the mother she herself never had. But she dismissed them as her grandmother's fantasies and she continued her efforts to appease the Lizard King.

Over the years, the Princess enlisted the aid of wise men to help her in her quest to free her father. She dutifully did whatever they advised. She studied whatever texts they recommended. She worshipped at any temple they suggested. She performed heroic deeds and fabulous feats, all to no avail. Still, she remained hopeful. She would seek out each new wizard or priest or seer when he came to the kingdom and ask that he tell her what to do to break the spell, which kept her father from her. Each time the Princess's efforts failed, at the very moment of her defeat, the Queen would appear and unmask the latest wizard or priest or seer as yet another of her legions of lizard slaves and laugh as the Princess again felt humiliated and powerless.

Years passed. The Princess was discouraged and afraid that her efforts would never be enough. Her father was becoming very old and soon it would be too late to save him. Worst of all, she noticed, as she looked at herself in the mirror, small patches of scales appearing on her own skin. And she knew that she herself was becoming a lizard person, that the spell holding her father also gripped her. She was tired. Her belief that there was any magic anywhere in all the universe strong enough to undo the spell cast by the Wicked Queen was fading away. She was ready to give up altogether, surrendering to the power of the Lizard King and his queen, when yet one more wizard came to the kingdom.

She heard that he had come from the land of many mountains far away. She thought perhaps it was worth one more try, that perhaps he knew of some things she had not yet done that might finally break the spell and free her and her father. She had doubts as she had at one time consulted a sorceress from that same land but she too had turned out to be a lizard. Still, one more chance was one more chance, so she decided to consult this wizard, vowing he would be the last and that she would keep her eyes open and her wits about her lest he show any sign that he might also be under the power of the Queen.

The new wizard was a rather strange sort. He offered no potions or powders, no spells or incantations. The Princess was totally baffled. She performed all the dances that she knew, the ones that always brought applause. She sang all the songs. He just sat there. She turned somersaults, jumped through hoops, twirled plates on her fingertips. He sat there some more. She dazzled and dazzled and glittered and twirled. Still he just sat. She cried and whimpered and pouted and stormed. And still he just sat. When she had done everything she knew to get applause or even a nod, she concluded at last that he was the genuine article, a wizard not in thrall to the wicked Queen. Finally exhausted by her efforts to please him, she told him the whole story — well almost the whole story as she omitted the part about her own lizard skin, carefully hidden under her clothes. She asked him to tell her what she needed to do to break the spell and return her dear father to her.

The Wizard looked at her with his sad knowing eyes. “There is no way to restore your father, save by giving up your own life and even that would not work. The only way that you can escape your father’s fate is to find the woman with stars on her dress and accept what she gives you.” With that he gave her a mirror, a pink stone, a deck of Tarot cards and some shells because wizards really like those sorts of things and told her that on the dark of the moon she must set off to find the lost queen. “Remember the stories and you will find your way. If you need my help, look in the mirror and you will find me there.”

The Princess was puzzled by what the Wizard told her, but wizards always speak in riddles. Certain that the things he gave her had magical properties — for they came from a wizard, after all — and knowing she had no other options, she decided to do as he said. So it happened that several days later, on the dark of the moon, she set out with her mirror, the pink stone, the Tarot cards and shells to find the woman with stars on her dress that her grandmother had told her about so very long ago.

In very short order, the Princess realized she had a major problem — she had not the faintest idea where she was going. She looked again through the things the Wizard had given her to see if perhaps she had overlooked a map or some directions, but she found only the mirror, the pink stone, the tarot cards and the shells. She even took out all of the cards and examined them one by one to see if maybe, just maybe there were some directions written on one of them. This

took her quite some time as she also read the detailed enclosure on the history of Tarot and how to do a layout of cards. No directions. No map. What kind of Wizard would send her off on a hunt for a lost kingdom without telling her anything about where to look or even what direction to start in?

She looked around the clearing where she had stopped. It was very dark, because, of course at the dark of the moon, the night is deepest. And there were strange noises coming from the bushes at the far side of the clearing. She was cold and lonely and hungry, because no one told her to bring food, and now she could not even see well enough to find her way back to her nice warm bed in her cozy room. She sat down on the ground, leaned against a tree, and began to cry. Her feet hurt and she did not like being out here in the woods in the dark by herself. This journey, which had seemed like such a good idea, no longer seemed possible. She looked at the scales on her hand and thought maybe it was already too late. She cried herself to sleep, half hoping an animal would eat her during the night, and hoping that when morning came, she would be able to find her way back home again.

The Princess slept for a very long time. Indeed, when she woke up, she thought perhaps she had slept for days or even weeks. When she opened her eyes and looked around her, the clearing seemed totally different — the trees taller, the brush thicker and where once there had been several paths leading out of the clearing, now there was only one. She was greatly relieved to see that the bag in which she carried her talismans from the Wizard was still on the ground next to her. After brushing herself off and straightening her clothes and smoothing her hair, for princesses do not like to look common even in the woods, she began to look around for something to eat as she was very, very hungry. She grumbled a bit about no one having told her to take some food with her — and no one told her she should wear sturdy shoes — wasn't it the Wizard's job to see she had what she needed? — and she wondered how long it would be until she again tasted the sumptuous food she so enjoyed. As she grumbled and complained, she wandered around the clearing and as she did, she noticed that the bushes were thick with berries and apple and pear trees. Feeling certain that with so much food around she would not starve, she began to pick berries and apples and pears and to gather nuts that she found on the forest floor on the edges of the clearing. She ate her fill and put enough for several more meals into her bag with

her treasures. Her search for food had led her out of the clearing along the path and now as she turned to go back, the path behind her seemed to have disappeared in thick brush leaving her no choice but to continue ahead.

The Princess walked and walked. The path wound through the woods down a valley up a hill over a mountain into another valley and along a stream. Her memory of home became both dimmer and sharper. She continued on her way going for days on end without meeting another person.

She walked for days and nights, stopping to sleep in clearings that always seemed to be in just the right place when she grew too tired to walk another step. She dined on berries and fruit. After many days and countless miles, she came to a small hut at the edge of the woods. Though it was not yet night, she decided to stop for it had been such a long time since she had seen any sign of other people. She hoped that perhaps whoever had built the hut would return by sundown and tell her where she was and perhaps how far she had to go to find the woman with stars on her dress.

The hut was small but tightly built and sparsely furnished with necessities — a table, a chair, a bed, and a nice fireplace with a generous hearth — no luxuries, but enough. She waited and waited but no one appeared. As she looked around she saw the hut showed no signs of recent occupancy and she realized that she was still quite alone. She began to cry for the first time since that lonely first night in the woods. She was tired. She was far from home. She was dirty and weary of eating berries and nuts. She was sure the Wizard had deceived her just to get rid of her. It had been so long since she had seen another person, she wondered if she would remember how to speak.

As night fell, she became very cold, so she lit a fire using a match that she found. She sat at the table and opened her bag for some more nuts. As she groped for them, the mirror fell out. She remembered the words of the Wizard, that if she needed his help, she need only to look in the mirror and she would find him there. She picked up the mirror and looked. A gasp of horror — a strange looking wild woman with a dirty face, unkempt hair, and rough weatherworn cheeks looked back at her! She turned around to see who this stranger could be but no one was there. She looked back to the mirror and again saw the face of the wild woman with the mad eyes. With

a sinking feeling, in that instant she knew — the wild woman looking back at her was herself. “That cannot be me!” she shrieked. She hated the Wizard in that moment, hated him for saying he would be there when she needed help, hated him for giving her this vile mirror, which she threw to the floor where it shattered into many pieces. She grabbed her bag, fumbling to close it, ran to the door, flung it open and ran out into the night, determined to run all the way home because anything was better than this.

She wandered far from home, far from comfort. No path. No clearings to sleep in. Where there had been no people, now there were many. She was in the company of thieves and murderers and beggars and scoundrels of all kinds. She increasingly became the woman in the mirror, though deep within she still considered herself the good and innocent princess. She gave herself to swindlers and lust-crazed merchants. She gambled. She lost. She lied. She cheated. She was drunk. She was greedy. Her temper was vile. Good people left when she entered a gathering. She aroused fear. She cast evil spells. She left death and destruction in her wake. And she was so lonely and lost she wept every night in despair.

The weather turned cold. Snowflakes swirled around her as she yet again moved on, away from the people, she had been with, wandering, hoping to find her way home. The wind picked up and blew harder. She pulled her tattered clothes around her to try to stay warm. She began to sob great gasping sobs, filled with a deep and terrible sorrow and despair, the burden of which bent her almost to the ground with pain and shame. Realizing she could not go far in the winter storm, that she would die if she did not find warmth and shelter, she tried to remember the way to the hut. But it had been so long since she had been there that she no longer had any idea which way to go. All of her efforts to be good, to please had brought her to this — a maddened hag lost in a snowstorm.

Huddled against the snow and cold, she reached into her bag for something to eat. With a cry of pain, she withdrew her hand abruptly. Something sharp had cut her hand and she was bleeding. She turned the bag upside down and shook the contents onto the snow-covered ground. Among the shells, the Tarot cards, and the stone, something glittered a bit. She reached for it and discovered a shard of the Wizard’s mirror, thrown to the floor and shattered so long ago. A mo-

ment's hesitation, a small shake of her head and she put the shard in her pocket, unable to face the image she feared she would see. All memory of the Wizard's words of comfort was gone.

Shame, sorrow. Abandoned, alone. Afraid, exhausted. No tricks left, no pride. She dared not return to the village where she had been, the village of the scoundrels. She no longer knew the way home. Besides, no one at home would recognize the ugly hag as the pretty princess who had left so long ago.

The snow continued to fall. She ate the remaining berries. She shivered, unable to get warm. Her hands and feet turned blue. Hands in her pockets, she fingered the shard of mirror as she thought about the stories her grandmother had told her. She wondered when the fairy godmother that always rescued lost princesses would appear. Then a deep chill of recognition passed through her. "There is no woman with stars on her dress", she thought, "and no fairy godmother who will materialize now and save me. There is nothing." She turned the shard in her fingers, absently and repeatedly as her mind wandered over her life. Tears streamed down her cheeks. And over the howl of the wind and hiss of the rapidly falling snow, the sound of great gasping sobs.

Motionless, covered with snow, silent and still, she remained where she had fallen to the ground, one arm flung over her face to hide it, one hand in the pocket with the shard. There she lay, silent, still, and near death in the wintry place where snow always falls and never melts, where cold winds always blow, where all life lies frozen, waiting for a spring that won't come.

A long time passed. Snow fallen on snow fallen on snow. Everything white and cold and glittery in its icy splendor. Underneath the snow, the Princess, her hands as they had been when she fell, seemed all but dead. Deep inside, under the mound of snow that she had become, an image. A dream perhaps. The image dissolved.

Again an image. The sad wise eyes of the Wizard. Only for an instant and then gone again.

A dream, an image of the Wizard and his words, "If you need me, look in the mirror and you will find me there." Deep inside the deathlike sleep, the Princess saw the image. In her pocket, her hand began faint, almost imperceptible movements, again fingering the shard. The image, the words, the sharp pointed shard.

Lost in her deep and terrible frozen slumber, where feeling is gone, her finger was scratched and her blood began to flow, a trickle, a few drops. Red blood stained the snow the faintest pink, the first hint of color in the icy landscape. She slept on, unaware of her bleeding, still slowly turning the shard in her hand.

Perhaps it was the dream, perhaps the blood that trickled ever so slowly into the snow, perhaps the slightest tinge of pink in the snow absorbed the sun. The Princess took a deep breath. Then another. More movement than she had made in a very long time. Her warm breath melted some of the snow around her and now she was in a space, a hollow space within the mound. From outside, no one would know she was there, that the snow-covered mound was she, unless they happened to notice that ever so pale tint of pink in the snow near where her hand was still slowly turning the shard.

Still in her frozen, though slowly thawing sleep, the images came faster. In her anger and disappointment and despair, she resisted waking up, preferring instead the icy comfort of her frozen isolation. And then a dream. The Wizard. She screamed at him, screaming her rage about his trickery and abandonment. He yelled back at her, words she could not understand but which cut through her like knives. In her sleep, she tightened her jaw and clenched her hands. And then—a sharp stab of pain in her left hand, too sharp to be ignored even in her frozen and remote state. A yelp of pain and she moved, the snow thrown off her like a discarded blanket. More yelps. She looked at her hand which was bleeding from a deep cut near her thumb. The mirror had again drawn her blood. She stuck her thumb into her mouth to quiet the pain. Ripping a strip of fabric from the hem of her dress, she bound the wound, muttering about worthless wizards and what on earth was she doing out here in the snow anyway? In a fury, she reached into her pocket to grab the bit of mirror. She took it carefully between her thumb and index fingers, preparing to hurl it far away from her, this mirror that had brought her nothing but trouble. She imagined the Wizard there and flinging it into his face. How dare he bring her, a Princess after all, to such a frozen, empty, and lonely place? She had wanted to go in search of the woman with stars on her dress, the wise old woman who would love her and care for her and show her how to free her father and herself, and that miserable Wizard sent her here, to this frozen, snow-filled, cold and lonely place. “A pox on you, Wizard!” she shouted into the wind, “And on your cursed mirror too!”

She pulled back her arm, preparing to hurl the mirror as far from her self as she could throw it. She was determined with it to throw the Wizard out of her life as well. With a mighty heave, she brought her arm forward, closed her eyes and threw. Smiling, she opened her eyes, expecting to watch the mirror disappear into the deep snow at the far side of the clearing. But wait! She saw no glinting object in the air. How could that be? She looked down at her hand, and there was the mirror shard. A frown. A curse. Arm back. A mighty throw. The mirror remained in her hand. A foot stomp. "I AM a princess. Do as I say!" she screamed at the bit of mirror and again a mighty hurl accompanied by a deep grunt. Rage bubbled up from deep inside her when she saw that again the mirror had remained in her hand. She stomped and yelled and jumped and screamed around the clearing, cursing and swearing and trying to shake the mirror from her hand.

Filled with rage and frustrated beyond anything she had ever felt, she burst into tears—hot, angry tears pouring down her cheeks. "It's all the Wizard's fault! I wish I were home with my mother. She would send him away, put him in the dungeon, make him sorry for doing this to me," she wailed. The more she cried, the stronger became the image of the Wizard in her mind, the more of his knifelike words she remembered, until the image and his words filled her whole being.

For the first time, she looked down at the bit of mirror, as if bidden by the Wizard. A horrific swirl of images whirling by, out of focus. She looked away. Her gaze drawn back again, something insisting she look at the images, that she bring them into focus. The spoiled willful child. The arrogant dismissive harridan. The liar. The cheat. The glutton. The rageful hag. The thief. All seen in the mirror as a kaleidoscope of images. She could only bear to look at them for a moment before being overwhelmed with shame. She hid her face. She began to sink again into the snow and into her frozen motionless state. But the Wizard in her mind would not let her. She returned again and again to look into the bit of mirror, each time seeing more details, more dark and awful images—of herself, of the Lizard Princess she had always been.

The timeless emptiness of the frozen sleep beckoned like paradise. She filled with shame and horror at herself, at the images of herself the mirror had revealed. "If I just lie down here and go to sleep, it will all go away." Haunted by the truth of what she had seen of herself, she kept

her face hidden, eyes covered to block any more dreadful images and she sank slowly to the ground, carefully arranging herself as she did so so that she might be comfortably positioned when she landed in the soft snow.

But wait! What was this? She snapped open her eyes and looked around, expecting the drifts and mounds of snow under which she had previously slumbered. All gone! The ground was barren still, but in the place of the snow and ice now a sea of mud. Sticky. Slippery. Wet. Soft. Mud.

Another burst of temper. She stormed around the clearing, yelling and stomping her feet and cursing and shaking her hands at the heavens. Someone would pay for this unprincess-like indignity; she would see to that!

The tantrum surged on, a huge outpouring of pent up rage and hatred and anger and destructive wishes. Curses uttered against her mother, her father and everyone in her family, against every wizard and seer or priest she had ever encountered. Deep guttural noises, grunts and groans and growls and hisses and yells and screams. On and on it went, day after day. Occasionally she would fall down in exhaustion and sleep for a little while but when she awoke, the rage took over, possessed her again. Every trace of the sweet tempered sad and beautiful Princess had disappeared. She uttered every vile word she knew, cursed everyone who had crossed her path, screamed invective at the heavens, tore her clothes into shreds. Animal utterances, indecipherable words, unmistakable expressions of rage and hatred.

As she raged, she moved in a circle around the clearing. In a matter of days, the ruts from her walking were visible and a few days after that, they were deep. The more she raged, the more she went around in her circle and the deeper the ruts became. Indeed, it seemed she might wear ruts so deep she would disappear from the face of the earth.

In the back of her mind, the Princess half expected that a handsome Prince would appear, on a white horse perhaps. And though everyone else who came upon the maddened raging hag would quickly leave in fear and disgust, he would stop, get off his horse, walk closer and look at her, somewhat amused by her violent outbursts and eruptions, see the beautiful woman underneath the filth and take her in hand. In fact, she rather wished that just that kind of Prince would come along and sweep her off her feet and, full of laughter and strength, take her home, clean her up and live with her happily ever after. That is the way for Princesses, after all. So, until her

head disappeared below the level of the ground, she would surreptitiously glance out every once in a while to see if the Prince had arrived. Much to her surprise and disappointment, there was no sign of him, no sign at all.

Ever so slowly, her rage began to subside; the noises became softer; the walking less agitated. She was tired of yelling and screaming. She ached from the constant walking. Her throat hurt. Her feet hurt. She was hungry. And she was lonely. Very lonely. She had to look up to see ground level, she had walked herself so deep into the earth. Getting out of here would not be easy. She stood and looked up at the sliver of sky she could see above her. She imagined that it must be spring or even summer up there, so long had passed while she was lost in her madness. She wished for a ladder or rope to climb or, better yet, someone to come and rescue her, but it had been ages since she had last seen or spoken to another person.

For the longest time she sat on the ground and looked up and looked at the walls of the prison she had made for herself. Then she would get up and move to a new spot on the circle in the earth, sit and look some more. The obstacle seemed insurmountable. With the ground level so far overhead, how could she hope to be able to climb out? Despair nibbled at the edges of her mind, but she kept looking, staring at the walls, waiting. Waiting now not for someone to come and rescue her, just waiting, waiting for the solution to come. Someone looking down at her might think she was doing nothing, that she was as withdrawn and inert, as she was in the snow, but she was not. She was waiting. She was as if pregnant, waiting for the birth of something she had never known. Her quiet, her stillness, her looking at the walls filled her.

Until the moment of her realization that no Prince was going to come and rescue her, she was fully the Princess; even in her worst times, she was imperious and demanding and certain she was entitled to whatever she wished. Her ranting at the Wizard, her wandering in the dark, her slumber in the snow, her madness in the mud—not for a moment was she unaware she was a princess nor did she ever feel that she should not be treated as royalty, that she was not due whatever she wished. For that, after all, is how Princesses are.

But as she sat and waited, as she looked at the walls of her circular prison, a new thought began. A strange feeling seeping into her awareness. A feeling tinged with sorrow and regret, loneliness and desire and feeling small was slowly filling her, slowly softening her, washing

away her rage. Memories—the Wizard’s deep sad eyes, her mother, her father, her grandmother—all seen in a different way. Longing and regret. Memories of the talismans the Wizard had given her and a sweep of shame that she had not taken better care of them so that now all that remained was the shard of mirror stubbornly stuck to her hand. Memories of travelers she met along the way, travelers willing to share their bread with her, their fires with her, their company with her. Travelers coldly discarded after she took whatever she needed from them. A Princess does not consort with commoners after all. The memories projected on the walls around her like a moving mural, surrounding her with friendships cast aside, love rejected, joy abandoned. Still she sat and waited and watched.

As time was no longer of importance, no one, least of all the Princess knew how long she sat there pondering, allowing feeling and memory to grow. One day she stood up. She pried a rock out of the wall, a rock just the right size to fit her hand. She began to dig a hole a couple of feet above the ground, and then another and another until she had taken them as far up the wall as she could go. She put a foot into the first one, hands into two above. And she hauled herself up to the last set of holes. Then clinging with one hand, she dug out another hole and moved up a little bit further. It was exhausting and dirty work, harder, more demanding work than she had ever done. In all of her wandering, she had never broken a fingernail, never gotten dirt under her nails, never sweated with exertion; never in her life had she done any of the things she now was setting herself to do. Her arms became heavy from fatigue; still, she inched her way up the wall. And then she reached a point where she could not hold on another moment, when her arms simply could not support her and she crashed back onto the ground. A flash of anger and then she started to cry. And the old feelings of unfairness and privilege and wanting to withdraw and give up crept back in. She wept softly and slowed down, inching toward the motionless isolation of the snow cave. But, even as she was attempting to retreat, even as she was angry because she, a Princess, did not deserve this, should not have to suffer this, something stronger was at work.

How many times must a Princess fall before she loses her crown? Again and again, she would slowly, with great effort, inch up the wall, extending the path a little bit with each effort, convinced that once she reached the top, everyone would recognize her as the Princess she was and all this toil and trouble would end. How many times must a Princess fall?

Her days became a succession of climbing, falling, climbing, falling again. Yet, each effort to climb was also making her stronger, more capable. Each fall made her more aware of her aloneness, of the uselessness of her title. A glance in the bit of mirror showed not a dazzling Princess in her crown, not pampered and loved royalty, not an elegantly coifed beauty. The mirror showed a dirty, bedraggled, unkempt woman, indistinguishable from an ordinary peasant in the fields. A wave of grief and sorrow as she felt the recognition of her ordinariness, the loss of her privilege. In that wave, a fear that if she could not be a Princess, then she could be nothing, that all of what she was was due to her royal status, now removed from her.

For the longest time, she sat there at the bottom of her ring-like pit, mouth open, a terrified look on her face. As if it were bouncing off the walls of her prison, like a ricocheting bullet, the recognition of her utter nothingness, of her unexceptional ordinariness, came at her again and again. The crown was gone, the beauty hidden, loyal subjects too far away to even remember her. No handsome rescuer Prince. No one to charm or entice to help her. And now, divested of all the trappings of her privilege, the final blow, the stripping away of the last remnants of her royal self. Her skin was on fire as if being burned off her body. Her bones wracked with pain, as she felt it, this dreadful knowing, move down even into her marrow, relentlessly seeking out and destroying every vestige of her former self.

A Princess, now brought so low, might well go on and on curled up in a heap on the floor of her prison, aware only of her misery and failings, and for a time that was just what she did. Eventually she sat up; she looked down at herself and at her dirty hands and ragged nails, so unlike the hands of a pampered and coddled princess. She got up and slowly walked over to the place where she had fallen, picked up the rock and began to climb once more, inching up the wall that seemed to have no end. When she tired, when her arms became heavy, she found a way to rest without needing to return to the bottom again. The work was slow and hard. Dig out a hole. Climb higher. Dig another hole. Handholds followed by footholds. She grunted with exertion, sometimes cried, sometimes yelled, but she kept on digging the holes and creeping up the wall, her blind efforts acknowledgment that she had herself worn the ruts so deep, that the wall was of her making.

No one, especially not the princess knew how long she was at it, climbing up the walls of her prison. But the day arrived when she could just see over the top and with a heave, she threw herself out of the hole onto the ground. Then she began to laugh. She lay on her back, looking up at the clouds and the sun and brilliant blue sky and she laughed. And laughed. A sound not heard from her or by her in what seemed like forever. As she laughed, the air became warmer, the breeze softer, the grass greener and deeper, the flowers more brightly colored, the smells sweeter. Great peels of laughter. Giggles. Chuckles. Guffaws. Chortles. Her delight in her success at getting herself out of that deep hole washed over her again and again and each time brought a new wave of delighted and delightful laughter.

Laughter, as wonderful as it feels, cannot go on forever and eventually the gales of laughs quieted to giggles, then to smiles. She lay in the grass and felt the earth against her back and the sun on her face as if she had never felt them before, because of course, she never really had felt them. At long last, the laughter subsided to a quiet pleasure and, her need to feel the earth beneath her sated, she got up and looked around her. A lovely meadow, some trees and a few cows not far away. A small pond. A road curving off into the distance. The chimneys of houses just visible on the horizon.

She walked over to the pond, looked around herself carefully and seeing no one, removed her clothes and stepped into the water. How good it felt to finally be able to cleanse herself, to wash her hair and her body, to feel the water slide over her skin. She swam and dived and played in the pond. Play, something so long absent from her life that it seemed brand new. Occasionally, she glanced at the shore, the remnant of her old self believing that this time the Prince would come. But he did not and that seemed fine.

On the bank, she allowed the sun and the breeze to dry her and her tattered clothes, which, though very worn and in poor repair, were all she had and still quite serviceable. She dressed. Her hand, as it had so often since that time in the snow, went to her pocket and the shard of mirror that remained there still. She took it out and paused, wanting to look at her reflection, wanting to see her youthful and beautiful face again, yet also afraid. Deep breaths, the warmth of the sun, the memory of the Wizard's words, delight in freedom and finally she looked. And then stared, mouth open, not knowing what to think, how to feel. The face looking back at her was not

the face of the young, beautiful and haughty Princess. It was a pleasant face, neither beautiful nor ugly. Lined, weather worn. Wrinkles around her eyes and her mouth. Hair wiry and gray. Eyes clear and gaze direct. She smiled at this woman in the mirror and saw her smile back and her face dissolved in a web of fine lines and softness. Rather than horror at the changes she saw, delight bubbled up from deep within and she laughed. And giggled. And smiled. Bathed and rested, she set out toward the town, hoping to find a place there.

A place she found indeed, an abandoned cottage on the outskirts of town. She scrubbed and cleaned and repaired the little house, discovering things she did not know she could do. She chopped down trees, sawed firewood and stacked it. Cleaned out the chimney. Repaired the well, Planted a garden, flowers in the front, vegetables in the back. She traded fruit from her trees for cloth and other things she could not grow. She raised sheep and spun their wool. And she made herself a deep blue dress, a dress with stars on it. Amazed by the transformation she had wrought in the abandoned old cottage, townspeople began to stop by. She became a part of the fabric of the town, the old woman with stars on her dress. And she did indeed live happily ever after.

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