The Broken Princess

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O

nce upon a time there lived a beautiful princess. Her father was the king of a small kingdom on the sea. On the day when the princess was born, three fairies came on a sunny May afternoon and stood over her crib.

The first fairy said "Behold you shall be beautiful. Tall and like a willow tree, with dark hair like a waterfall at midnight."

The second fairy said "Behold you shall be gifted with vision and insight. You shall see what is going wrong before it goes wrong, and seek to fix it. You shall see those who no one else notices, and see the good in them. You shall not rest when things are not as they should be, when people are treated unfairly."

And the third fairy said "Behold, your heart will love hotly, deeply and fully. It will not be as logical, chilly and distant as the hearts of some around you, but will burn brightly in the night with a hot flame nothing shall be able to extinguish."

*I'm* not *sure I like the sounds of all of that*, her mother thought to herself. But she smiled and smiled, because it was the thing to do.

*I hope this one's as good as the other ones*, her father the king thought to himself, for he had many children already.

And the gods heard it all, as did the sea.

But then that chill May evening, once the sun had set, a witch crept into the same room and put a curse upon the sleeping babe:

"You shall be beautiful, yes. You shall be gifted with vision, yes. You shall have a heart which can love hotly, deeply and fully, yes. But this curse I do hereby lay upon you herewith to negate every blessing with which you have been blessed, to make you a broken princess: you shall reject yourself utterly and be paralyzed by dizzying shame and loathing. You shall be blind as to your own gifts and loveliness. You shall forget every kind deed you do for others, and remember every time you upset anyone in any way. And no matter how earnestly you try to find someone who will accept you, you will not be able to allow him to do it, nor will you be able to respect him properly, not if he respects and accepts that which you yourself do not."

And the witch left, cackling at her evil intent. And the gods heard it, as did the sea.

And the princess grew and delighted in the kingdom, in the doings of the scullery maids and cooks in the kitchen, and in the books of the castle library. Often she would sit in a shaft of sunlight, reading a book and eating something from the kitchen.

But sometimes she wept, and when she wept, she went at night and wept salty tears into the sea, and it loved her and wished it could enfold her in its waves without drowning her. But the princess feared what was in the sea, because she knew it was unfathomably deep and full of things she did not wish to look upon.

When the princess grew old enough to dream dreams that might well come to fruition, one evening her mother took her aside. "Come, sit with me on your bed," her mother told her. They sat on the bed and her mother laid out two baskets. One was large and one was small. "In the large basket, first we will put all of your dreams," her mother said. And so the princess took out her dreams and trembling put them, in the large basket, trusting her mother with every bit of her deep heart.

"Now let us go through them and see which dreams are *proper*, which ones befit the daughter of a king, the wife of a great man, and of my own daughter, as the next princess in this family. We will put those dreams in the smaller basket. Those dreams you may keep. The other dreams you must needs burn in the hottest part of the fire and forget about having."

And then a heated argument took place. The scullery maids, cooks and butler closed their doors and pretended nothing was going on.

When it was over, the broken princess took the baskets with her and went down to the seaside and stood on the wharf. The approved dreams she kept in the smaller basket, and the larger basket she hurled as far as she could from her, where it sank beneath the waves. Then she wept inconsolably. The salt of her tears joined the salt of the sea, and it loved her, and the dreams it had given it.

Also, anger grew in her, and as was her wont, the anger being a true part of her true self, she hated the anger and rejected it. Yet still it grew, because she was angry to have it. She was ashamed to have it as well, and she clutched the shame to her bosom with all her might and loved it.

Then one day someone who resolved to become a great man of the kingdom rode into town on a powerful black charger. Gaston was broad and blond and grinned a lot. Too much, really. He was always terribly cheerful and laughed loudly. And he decided to take the princess for his own.

One day he asked "Let's see this dream basket of yours, then."

So the princess brought her dream basket to him and he poked through it, smiling. The smile faded slightly, as he compared some of the princess' dreams for the future with his own. *I will have to think about this*, he thought, and did not tell the princess.

And the princess wasn’t sure if he liked her enough, so she took her dream basket to her mother again. Once again her mother got a basket to fill with all the inconvenient dreams. "Well, *this* certainly must go, and this and this, if you are to marry a man such as Gaston!" her mother said. "In fact, let us remove *all* of the dreams, except the dreams that involve the man himself." And so they did.

When they were done, the broken princess said nothing and took the basket down to the sea again. The remaining dreams did not need a basket, but fit in the small pocket of her frock. Again she hurled the basket of inconvenient dreams as far from her as she could. As she threw it, she actually lost her balance and fell on her face on the wharf. For a long time she crouched there, sobbing salt into the salt sea. And it loved her.

Eventually the day of the announcement of her wedding approached. Gaston approached and hefted her up onto the back of his black charger and said "I have something to tell you." The princess sat and looked at him, trusting him with every bit of her deep, passionate heart.

"The gods have spoken to me in a dream," Gaston said. "They have told me that you are not worthy to marry a great man. Not a great man of any kind. No, in fact, you won't do at all. And so I must leave you now." And he did.

And the princess added more salt to the sea. And it loved her all the more.

And bereft of all her improper dreams, the princess entertained more suitors, for she was as beautiful as a willow tree by a pool at midnight. She warned each one that she was a broken princess, and that her self was purest poison. Yet still the suitors came.

One frog she refused to kiss, because doing so certainly might have turned him into a prince, and then she would have had to marry him. He was an odd sort of frog she thought, as frog or no, he seemed determined to go down to the sea with her and go on a quest to find her dreams and her self and love them utterly. This was not a quest the princess was willing to undertake herself, nor let a suitor undertake with her.

As for her dreams, the broken princess could not show them to anyone. They'd been thrown far from her. As for her self, she kept it shut away in the deepest, darkest recess of the castle, keening and wailing. She resolved that none would ever know her self, nor marry it, and none could dream her dreams with her.

What she then had left to offer was her body, to bear children, please her husband and serve the household. "A body is a useful thing," she thought. "It can find useful things to do for everyone. Everyone can use help, and I can help. I can tidy, and clean and cook and bear children."

She did not think long about the fact that her body was not what would go with her into the afterlife.

For its part, her body would have none of this. It raged and let her down and lusted and got sick and would not sleep and fought. It needed a self, and it needed the dreams, because bodies are fed by, take rest with, and are fuelled by pure dream. And without them, they die. But still she starved her body, and in return as she’d took its dreams, often it would not sleep. When it did, it gave her *other* dreams. Revenge dreams.

And one day she met a good man. He did not quest after her dreams nor her self much, because she didn't want him to, and this kept her from getting too afraid or upset. She tried to get betrothed to him, but it didn't seem to work. Not at first, anyway. You see, she had no self for him to marry. The only dreams she had left to offer were of fulfilling his own dreams, such as he had, which is a poor, second-hand thing. So it didn't seem to work.

She was frantic because now she had not a single inconvenient dream left to sacrifice to the sea, which loved her and terrified her. And still she didn’t seem able to get a husband. So she waited and resolved that if she ever grew any more dreams, she would certainly throw them into the sea with the rest, so there would be no dreams of hers to compete with his. Perhaps that would prove she was serious. Perhaps the gods would honour this sacrifice. Gods want sacrifices.

And so she kept at it. Trying to get betrothed so that she could have children and be a mother like her own unto them. Not quite doing it. And she added her salt to the sea. And the sea loved her. And the man tried to. And they all lived ever after.