

The Prince and the Engineer– A Fairy-tale

It's not fair to begin with "once upon a time". In my recent conversations with other women, I realize that the reoccurrence of this tale is a certainty, and yet it was told to none of us as young girls who needed warning. So I tell it here.

There lived a girl. A woodcutter's daughter. Her parents called her Beth. She was born one warm summer evening to an overbearing mother and nervous father. He was almost certainly nervous because of her overbearing nature, and his constant agitation only made her more overbearing. So they proved a wonderful blueprint of marriage for their daughter. As she grew up, she herself spent most of her time escaping her genetics by daydreaming about the future and how the world would be better someday. Although living excessively in her own head, Beth was good with numbers so she often did the books for her father's woodcutting business, but mostly she was fascinated with the things other people built from the wood he cut. Being a practical girl, she knew that wood was expensive, and required cutting down trees. She loved the tangled wild of the woods and hoping to preserve it, she thought there must be more efficient ways to build houses. Maybe we can use other materials, like the sticks or the leaves from the trees to manufacture the houses and structures that people need without being so harmful to the environment around the village.

So Beth packed up her things and off she went into the forest to discover what she could about the world and to try to make it better. She spent time in the forest cataloguing the leaves, dirt, and other matter. She dug earthy lumps of clay from the ground and found that if she put it together with some of the rocks and gravel in just the right ratio she could construct blocks, and from these build strong structures. She did this for a while, but even

though she initially was fascinated by every stick and grassy clump of dirt, eventually she became lonely from talking only to the woodsman who wandered into the woods and the people of the neighbouring village. Besides, she was sure that the people in the village thought that she was a bit weird, always roaming around caked in dirt and trying to convince them to build their homes with her buckets of clay and rocks. She felt like they humoured her and gave her food and shelter, but were not unlikely to burn her as a witch if someone's goat should have a stillborn calf. She felt outside and disconnected from everything, until one day when a handsome stranger showed up in the village.

He was tall, and he was dark, and he was charming. Everyone liked him immediately. The very same people who looked at her quizzically and shook their heads from side to side as she went on and on about her vision for building without wood, joyfully embraced the stranger with the dark and penetrating eyes and invited him into their homes. He told them exciting stories about his adventures and showed them beautiful shiny things from his travels. He told them that he was a prince, but had lost his kingdom to a wicked witch. He promised to bring them treasures from his kingdom on his next visit. It was no surprise that everyone seemed to fall in love with the handsome stranger, none more than Beth. Beth looked at him and saw the missing piece of herself, the piece that was comfortable in the center of things with all attention focused on him. It would not be overstating to say that he cast a spell over her.

One day as Beth was pulling up water from the well to build her bricks, she felt as though she was being watched. She looked up from her bucket to find the handsome stranger standing only a few feet away and looking at her in a way that made her throat feel dry and her head feel dizzy.

“Hello” he said.

“Hello” she replied.

“What are you doing there?”

“I’m building bricks that will help the villagers construct a town hall without cutting down trees.”

“Wow, that’s brilliant.” He said, as he moved closer. He seemed to actually mean it. “Do you sell them these bricks?”

“No, not really. I’m still trying to perfect my formula. I just give them away and they give me a little food and a place to sleep.”

“Oh, no,” he said moving still closer, “You really ought to monetize your bricks and sell or trade them. I can show you how. You know you have beautiful eyes.”

“Really?” she blushed. Other boys had tried to talk to her before, but their overtures always seemed clumsy, and her response worse still. The handsome stranger was as smooth as warm butter, and she felt herself melting into a puddle in his hands.

Soon he was meeting her at the well every day and following her on her daily walks in the forest. The villagers now looked at her with high regard and she didn’t quite understand what had changed or why he was pursuing her, but she could only assume that he did in fact admire her. He spent so much time with her that he even began to become involved with brick making. He didn’t want to make the bricks, that work was dirty and he claimed that he wasn’t very good at it. He was mostly interested in selling the bricks to the villagers and building a business. He said they could use the money to build a kingdom. She was glad to

have the help and someone who seemed to love her so much that he wanted to be her partner. Within months they were married.

And they were happy, for a while. Beth thought that she had indeed found her handsome prince and that life would be a fairy tale. Then slowly, she started to notice things. Small things at first. He went on long trips very often and he would return home exhausted. He said that he was doing it to find more villages to sell bricks. She would stay home and make the bricks and take care of the house. While he was indeed very handsome and well groomed, always impeccably dressed in the fashions of the times, she noticed that his hair was coarse and grew rather quickly. In fact, he shaved many times in a day. His teeth were a bit sharp and yellow and he ate more meat than most of the people she knew. She wasn't sure where he got all of this meat either.

While all of these things weren't exactly what she had hoped for in a husband, she still loved him dearly. After all, she was far from perfect herself. She was not very good with people and she would worry too much. Her dresses also never fit right and bunched up in the chest when they were tight in the hips. She could accept his small imperfections and love him unconditionally.

Meanwhile the business of brickmaking was going well. Beth's charming husband was good at selling the bricks and she was good at making them. People had started to buy their bricks in all of the surrounding towns. From time to time Beth would hear stories of people going missing in some of these villages, but she just assumed it was a coincidence and ignored the chatter. Beth was happy and content with the little bit of security she now had. They had a lovely little home on the edge of the forest and a beautiful garden, but somehow

this wasn't enough for her husband. He was always looking for more ways to make money, traveling farther and farther for longer and longer.

"What is wrong, dear husband?" she would ask, "Why are you so unhappy?"

"I am not unhappy; I just want more." He responded, "I am a prince by nature, and I need a castle and a carriage, and I need people to see that I am a prince. Really it's part of my job. How can I expect people to believe that I am a charming prince, and buy what I am selling, without the trappings of a prince?"

"Okay, dear, then let's build a house from our bricks on the hill. Then everyone will see it. Will that make you happy? Will you be with me more and travel less?"

"Perhaps."

And so they did. Beth worked furiously to make bricks for the new grand house while also continuing to supply the growing business. She became very tired, but the excitement of a new grand house seemed to make him happy. That made her happy. Eventually the house was complete, and they moved in and sold the old house. Her husband seemed content for a bit, but slowly that old familiar feeling returned and she could see him casting around the new grand house with a sullen look on his face. She asked what was wrong.

"I want more," he replied, "This isn't good enough. I can see a house over on that hill that is bigger still than ours."

"But darling, that is the castle. Of course it is bigger than ours. "

"So, why shouldn't we live in a castle," he growled "I am a prince by nature, after all."

“Yes, darling, I can see that you are, but we just finished building this house. I am tired from building so many bricks and I am behind on making them for the townspeople. Cannot we just rest for a bit and enjoy each other?”

He gave her a menacing look. From that point on he was home less and less. He travelled far and wide selling bricks and complained that Beth was not making them fast enough. If she laid down to have a rest he complained that she was inefficient and needed too much rest. She should be tougher and more like him. She needed to focus more on making bricks. He would do the books from now on to help her focus. She shouldn't worry about it. Beth started to become very unhappy. She didn't much like making bricks anymore and she was lonely because he travelled so much. She was also hearing more and more stories of villagers going missing and she began to worry for their safety. If she were to mention that to her husband, he would berate her and tell her that she wasn't ambitious. He accused her of worrying too much and said that she simply liked being unhappy and was impossible to satisfy. There must be something wrong with her. She decided that maybe there was.

And so despite misgivings, she agreed that they should build a castle. They drafted plans for a grand castle that would be the envy of all of the folk in the valley. It would require thousands upon thousands of bricks. They would need help. He began to bring in workers for her to train, and pretty soon they had a team of brick-makers building the castle and supplying the surrounding town with a surplus of bricks. At the center of it all, stood her charming husband, directing the effort and developing the expanding business. He was doing this all for them, he said. This castle would only be an example of what could be done with their bricks and how beautiful it would be. How it would help in the mission of saving the trees and promoting sustainable building! By the time it was all built, she was spent.

But she was also relieved. Finally, he would have what he wanted. The castle was indeed grand. It was a beacon to all the people of the countryside, and they travelled from far and wide to admire it. Beth thought that finally she could rest and enjoy the fruits of her labor. She was wrong. The more people came to admire the castle that she had helped to build, the more she was pushed aside and ignored. Her charming husband was now the self-proclaimed charming prince, and was constantly entertaining guests and going to grand parties in the other grand houses of the realm. She often found herself alone tending to a house she didn't want on a hill far away from the village that she loved.

One day the prince came home with a strange look in his eye. Beth was wary. He had not been home much but now urgently wanted to talk with her in private, and asked all guests to leave the castle.

"What is it dear? I am so glad to see you after all this time, but you are like a stranger." She said.

"I need something different." He said, "I am not happy. I think it is because I am a prince, and while I have a castle and a carriage now, I do not have a real princess. You are not a real princess. "

"Maybe I can try to be more like a princess?"

"No, I don't think you can. And besides, I want a real princess and I have found one already. She saw my beautiful castle on the hill when she was passing by and came in for a look, and we just hit it off immediately. Her father is the king a few realms over. She's a really good person."

“So what am I supposed to do, just disappear? Everything I have is in this castle. Where am I to go?”

“Hmmm.” He said, “That is a good point. I can fix this.”

And with that he opened his mouth let out a blood curdling growl and bared his sharp yellow teeth. His eyes shined and twinkled and she could see the bristly hairs under his collar stand up. “How strange”, she thought, “he looks just like a wolf.” And before she could process that thought and connect it properly to his strange shaving routine, he leaned over and tried to rip through her neck with his yellow teeth. Instinctually she understood what was happening and leaped out of the way grabbing a hot poker from the giant central fireplace. She swung it over her head and it landed squarely on the side of his face driving a yelp of pain out of his salivating mouth and giving her a chance to run out the door and through the garden. She did not look back.

She kept going through the woods for two days until she got back to the village where she had first begun making bricks. She felt safe there and was relieved when she realized that the villagers were actually happy to see her.

“Where is your husband?” they asked.

“Oh, he turned out to be a wolf.” She said. “He tried to eat me.”

“Ah, makes sense.” They said. “We noticed lots of sheep going missing when he was around, but you were so nice we didn’t want to say anything.”

She smiled.

The villagers asked her if she would stay and become the town engineer, since they had wanted to build a school and a playground, but needed some help with the job. She agreed.

Soon after, they elected her mayor and she helped turn the town into a prosperous center of commerce with good schools and safe streets, free of wolves. She lived happily ever after.

As for the wolf-prince, he continued to move from castle to castle, charming and then eating princesses until one day a neighbouring king caught him trying to eat his daughter and had him shot and mounted on the wall with his other trophies.

The End