

[Blurb: This was my first stab at the story – the Grimm-dark tragic/cynical indictment of the fairytale in its purest form. You know the writer is disillusioned with the patriarchy when she uses lots of “ands” strung together. I threw it in for the web archeologists, but also because this is the only time I wrote about all the dress stuff which is such a weird but sort of central touch in the original story. In the Perrault Donkeyskin had this godmother whose first advice was “nah, babe, you’re gonna do what he says but first ask for these really nice dresses.” Like, what was the ideal outcome there? I tried to do something with it in this. For my treatments I mostly just did the first story piece to feel it out. Everything contained here is basically the first 300 words of “Donkeyskin.” Step #1 for me when the actual scripting started was “trim trim trim.”]

She’d never had a mother to warn her about men. She didn’t have anyone to teach her how to say “no” gently enough to evade her father’s anger, but not so gently that it would twist into a “yes” inside his ear.

Her father must be forgiven, though. His wife was so beautiful and her death was so inopportune. It cast a glow of melancholy kindness onto his big crusading shoulders. He basked in the light with something like contentment, and never thought of taking a second wife.

He and his glow cast the same sad, benevolent eye upon his baby daughter. “How sad, that she should be motherless,” he would say to his subject lords.

His baby daughter grew up just as she ought to without saying a word more than she had to. She was universally loved for her quiet “grace” and the people started to whisper that she was becoming as beautiful and good as her mother, particularly when she stood just behind her father, the sweetly glowing warrior-king. Her mother had been bright and wild-eyed (and red haired) where the princess was measured and even dim (and black-haired) but people spoke about their likeness anyway and the two resolved themselves into one vague and lovely baby-queen, princess-woman.

The king eventually heard the murmured praise of his daughter and he was a little embarrassed that he hadn’t been their source. The sweet sad glow of the widower had become as a second skin to him, so much so that he barely thought of his queen except for the fact of her absence. His daughter was perfectly satisfactory and untroublesome, and so he didn’t think of her very often.

To save face (and glow) he drew his daughter closer to him to kiss her cheeks and proclaim his pride; the princess seemed embarrassed and a bit pleased at the sudden attention.

The king proclaimed at table one night that his daughter was growing up too fast – soon she’d be sixteen and he would have to find her a husband. In advance of

that happy day (here he sighed with anticipatory nostalgia) it was high time and goodly wise that she should learn the duties of a queen.

“Come, dearest girl, and sit to my right as the lady of the house!”

She didn't know how to say, no, Father, I still feel like a child. As she blushed and shook her head she was gently tugged and pushed into the Mistress' seat.

She found almost right away that she didn't like running the castle. She had no opinions about its day-to-day operations and yet had to say 'yes' at every turn to obsequious servants. Her 'yes' was meaningless because they wouldn't have had a 'no' in any case.

One day she ventured to suggest that the gardenias were blooming and they were her favorite, and so they would be lovely on the tables that evening.

“Oh,” said the housekeeper, “We've been putting out dahlias this time of year since...before you were born.”

The princess knew that if she insisted the housekeeper would obey, but she couldn't find the energy and so she just said 'yes.'

As the housekeeper kowtowed and left, the princess decided that the gardenias were much more beautiful where they were, sunlit and unplucked.

As she took on more and more public duties her beauty was remarked upon more and more (although the few who spoke to her outside of the receiving room found her vanishingly small). The people almost couldn't bear to think of her leaving her dear father all alone to marry, and what would become of the crown then? The whole kingdom would fall to her son by heaven knows whom.

The king didn't want this to happen either. He'd grown to like having a queen about, particularly one so charming and agreeable. As he got used to having a queen in public he began to wish for a private queen again.

Like any king he was used to turning his wishing into having.

The king had a monstrous idea. It made sense for what the king wanted: he wanted a Queen and an heir that was all his own; his daughter was so beautiful, and so like her mother.

(She wasn't, really, at all.)

The kingdom was shocked and horrified but there was nothing they could do. Another girl in such danger could have appealed to her father's lord, but the father of a princess in those days had no lord, no law that governed him beyond his own will and natural honor. The cries of shock from the people were passionate, but destined to be impotent and brief.

The princess herself, upon receiving the news, did not blush or pale. Her ladies were unnerved by her silence and left her quickly. In private they said to each other that the princess had not seemed surprised by the news, not surprised at all.

The young princess, left alone in her girlish room, didn't feel anything for a long time except for perhaps a draft.

At length she became aware of a crackling along her skin. She stepped to the mirror and expected to see lightning crawling over her. She looked just the same, but her eyes had white at all the edges of them like the stag the instant before he bolted. She had always hated to hunt. For the first time she thought that she looked a bit like her mother. She sat down at her mirror, stared at herself, and started to think.

Her father wanted the whole business settled quickly. The sooner the deed was done, the sooner the tongue-wagging would stop. He seemed like he was sick with fever. The princess hoped desperately that he was merely ill. Perhaps a week of waiting would cool his hot spirit.

At the next banquet the king wanted to show off his 'betrothed' and the princess knew what her job was, and how she could remain 'betrothed' a little while longer.

"I cannot possibly marry yet," she said to him sweetly and softly (just as she'd learned from her life among men), "It would be shameful to marry in an old dress. I want my wedding to be beautiful – I want a feast! How long was your *first* wedding feast, my lord?"

"Two days and two nights, my dearest girl."

"Then I should like mine to last three days! Does that please you?"

"Yes indeed, little bird!"

"Very well, my lord. I will need new dresses! The most beautiful dresses that have ever been made."

"You shall have them!" He grasped for her. Sweetly, cunningly, she slipped away from him. She smiled so well that he only laughed and thumped his knee with his big red hand.

"The most beautiful dresses," she repeated. "I will need a white dress on the day, a dress as pearly, shining and soft as the moon. A dress like the – the maiden life I'm leaving behind."

"Indeed!" The king was a little drunk on good wine and the good feeling of being master of all he saw.

“For the second day of feasting, a dress the color of our shifting skies, white and blue! I’ve never seen our kingdom’s plains, my lord. For my wedding I would like to wear them, just as they look in real life.” She glanced at her father under the corners of her eyes. She’d never asked so much before.

The king was carried away by the fantasy she was leading him to weave. “Shifting, white and blue! And as fluffy as a summer cloud, well said!”

“Finally, dear f – my lord – the most beautiful dress of all before we begin a *second* life together. A dress of gold! Glittering to match the treasures you have brought us from your brave campaigns. Can you picture it?”

“I can, my little bird.”

“May I have these things?”

“You may, and you shall! But it will take time.”

“Will it not take time to order the proper guests and proper food?”

The courtiers were shifting uncomfortably by now. Did they want to be invited to oversee an abomination? Did they dare to stay home from the feasting? They were disgusted by her display and wondered if she had bewitched him.

“Proper, eh?” The king had given off trying to draw his daughter to him. There was plenty of time. “Very well, dove-ling. A feast of feasts for the queen of queens!”

The princess laughed and bowed her head in thanks. She swallowed hard to avoid vomiting on the floor.

She thought she had bought herself weeks and weeks, but in nine days the king had the dresses ready. She was so unhappy to find that they were the most beautiful dresses she’d ever seen. The first was clinging and soft, white dappled greyish and pearly smooth as the moon itself. The second was full and plush and the clouds across the surface of the skirt seemed to move under the eye. The third was so crusted over with gold and jewels that the princess could barely lift it in her arms.

She sat in her room in a heap of beautiful cloth and wept for the first time in years. Her father’s fever hadn’t abated; if anything he was even more eager to marry. She had a day and a night before the feasting began and she was damned.

She went back to her mirror blindly; her eyes were too swollen and blurry to see clearly. She looked at herself in the glass and her image seemed to vanish, blurred into obscurity by her tears. She was so surprised by the trick of the light that she stopped crying and just blinked at her smeary reflection for a moment. Her vision improved but her image in the mirror didn’t resolve itself into clarity.

She reached out to touch her vanishing mirror-self. When her fingers pressed against the glass she heard a tiny *click* and the mirror popped out from the wall like a cabinet. The princess glanced to the door behind her but she already knew that she was alone. No one but her father could bear to look her in the eyes. Her ladies had all fled to the safety of their own estates.

She swung the mirror out and looked inside. There were four cloaks: one was an ugly rough grey with wiry black hair running down its center, one was thick and deep black, one was dappled fawn, and the last was soft and flat brown. As she held each in her hand she could feel her body change. The rough grey cloak made the hand touching it appear rough and cracked. The black fur made her skin feel hot and tight – she could almost see her muscles jumping underneath the surface. The fawn didn't make her look any different, but she felt as if she were blurring at the edges and melting a bit into the carpet, like her mirror-self had. When she lifted the soft brown skin she felt her nerves hum and her feet twitch. She wanted to run far and fast into the shaded woods. She took her hand away from the cloaks and took a breath, for the last moment, as herself.