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Through (With) the Looking Glass

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Through (With) The Looking Glass

. . . [here] is the challenge and promise of a whole new psychic geography to be explored.

"When We Dead Awaken" – Adrienne Rich

The King was suffering from insomnia. He'd tried elixirs and potions, he'd repeated his mantra, he'd asked the advice of the court physician. Nothing worked. Tonight he sat at the parlor table turning his large brass key over and over until it grew warm in his hands. It was beginning to occur to him that the problem was his daughters. They were up to something, he was sure of it. Though he held them to a rigid daily schedule, though he double-locked their bedroom door as soon as the moon sailed over the hemlocks, they were showing signs of rebellion. They practiced dancing the tango across the patio when they should have been mixing pie crusts and sewing labels on the royal nightgowns. And there was something else, something much worse. Little Grace, the youngest—though he'd expressly forbidden it—had learned to read.

Just yesterday he'd gone into his daughters' room while they were at breakfast, intent on finding a clue that might explain why their golden shoes, in perfectly fine shape when they set them under

their beds at night, were worn to shreds by morning. After searching through twelve dressers, twelve desks and twelve well-appointed closets, he discovered a book, hidden under Little Grace's mattress. He stared at the cover, a bit frayed and still bearing imprints of the bed-slats. A Room of One's Own was printed in white against a bright blue background, and just above that the name of its author—a woman!

He stood perfectly still in the middle of the room. Yes, he could understand that perhaps Little Grace was finding this space, shared with her eleven sisters, too crowded. But that wasn't really the point, was it? He sighed. As a child, she'd been so good—sweet-tempered and well-behaved. But since becoming a young lady, she was revealing a different, more defiant side, running down the castle halls, ignoring his suggestions, talking back. Once he'd even caught her trying to sneak paper and ink from his desk. Now he was forced to admit that she actually seemed to enjoy the mutiny being fanned to a high flame beneath his castle's floorboards. The King stroked his beard. The reading was to blame. Little Grace had overstepped her boundaries and would have to be disciplined, that was certain. He slipped the book back under the mattress; it would be important to devise an appropriate punishment, he decided, before invoking the power of the throne.

He knew there was but one acceptable Story. Written long ago by the most powerful men in the land, it began with *Once Upon a Time* and ended with *Happily Ever After*. The King had recited it to every one of his twelve daughters as soon as they could hold a spoon. Since that time it had been his job to make sure they walked the path of The Story by making the way smooth and straight, the grass green and the sky cloudless, so that they could—as they must—accept their proper roles with untroubled anticipation. But over the past several months, since things had started veering dangerously off-track, the King could not be at all sure that his daughters were headed securely in the right direction.

"Enough!" The key made a ringing sound as it dropped from his hand and skittered across the stone floor. "I know exactly what will keep them in line." The King directed his remarks to the empty suit of armor standing at attention in the corner. "It's time my daughters were married. I shall arrange it at once."

Feeling an immediate soporific effect from this pronouncement, he climbed into bed and pulled the covers up to his chin. Within five minutes he was fast asleep.

* * *

The signs, posted along the Avenues of Silver and Gold and Diamonds, said, *Tired of having to Grimm and bear it? Come to an important meeting the last Thursday of June.*

The sisters, who had slipped unnoticed through the secret passage into their subterranean world as they did every night, were on their way to that evening's dance when Little Grace noticed something out of the corner of her eye. She broke off a twig from a tree of silver and held it in front of the sign so she could read the words. "This is surely an omen," she said. "Great changes are in the wind."

As if in reply, a playful breeze rippled through their hair and along the sleeves of their gowns. But her sisters, though mildly curious, treated Little Grace's enthusiasm with scorn.

"You're too serious," said one.

"*'Great changes are in the wind!'*" mocked another, and they all laughed. "C'mon," she said. "We'll be late for the dance."

This was Monday.

On Tuesday, Little Grace broke off a twig from a tree of gold and held it in front of the sign. This one read, *Sleeping Beauty, Awake! We're through (with) the looking glass! Come to an important meeting. Tell your friends.*

"This is a meaningful event," said Little Grace. "I'm sending word out to all the kingdoms."

“Don’t you dare,” said the eldest. “We’ve kept our night-dancing secret all these years. Just leave well enough alone.”

“That’s right,” said another. “With others involved, we’ll surely be caught.”

“It’s bad enough,” said a third, “that our door is locked by the King at night. What if we were grounded and forbidden to even *dream* about dancing? I’d just die. I really would.”

Little Grace lifted her chin and was silent. Early that morning, after the others had fallen asleep, she instructed a messenger to send word about the meeting to every corner of the kingdom.

By Wednesday, she was getting replies from across the land. That night she broke off a twig from a tree of diamonds and held it up to the sign. *Disenchantment is the first step toward transformation*, it read.

“What does that mean?” asked one of the twins.

“I think I know,” said the other. “It means you have to go through the darkness before you can see the light.”

“Yeah, but what does that have to do with us? We’re perfectly happy. Right?”

“It means we have to break the spell,” said Little Grace.

“What spell?”

“The spell that makes us think we’re perfectly happy—even though we’re trapped behind locked doors.”

“How do we do that?”

“Let’s go to the meeting and find out.”

* * *

Something disturbing was in the air. Never before in the wide, wide kingdom had so many princesses suddenly remembered the things they had lost. One remembered a button, another a glove. One recalled her favorite ball, fallen by accident into a well, while another remembered a glass slipper, stuck fast in cobbler’s wax on the palace steps. Gerda said she had to travel north,

through the Snow Queen's country, in search of her shiny red shoes. Briar Rose (the Sleeping Beauty) who, on the day she became a woman, had felt a clamp like a hand tighten against her throat till she was reduced to silence, went to look for her voice. Others, though they couldn't name what was lost or missing, left to find whatever had been cut from their bodies by invisible knives.

Whatever they'd lost was good enough. It was their ticket to the meeting.

* * *

Little Grace couldn't help herself. She stared at the front of the meeting room, unable to believe her eyes. There facing her behind a long table were the very women she'd been taught by the King to dread. Slowly she read the names on their cards. Audre. Angela. Adrienne. Bella. Gloria. Germaine. Without thinking, she spoke to herself the rhyme the King had made her learn as a child so she would never forget his warnings:

There she is, the malevolent fairy!
If we meet, I must be wary. (Father told me)

There she is, the cold evil queen!
If we meet, I must never be seen. (Father told me)

There she is, the wicked spell-caster!
If we meet, I must run past her. (Father told me)

There she is, the cruel stepmother!
If we meet, I must run for cover. (Father told me)

Women like this, who populated the underbrush and dead ends of the King's stories, were old and ugly, he'd said, unfit for the happy ending waiting for her and her sisters. But as she stood there wondering if she should simply turn around and run away, Little Grace had to admit she didn't see old and ugly. She saw cream-colored faces and faces the colors of chocolate and café au lait. She saw women with eyes that sparkled and shone. One had spiked red hair, and another hands that could pound nails into the most resistant of hardwood boards. These were not women

who sat with legs crossed and hands folded in their laps. They were easy in their bodies, stretching and arching and reaching out, unashamed of being seen, or heard. When they laughed, which was often, their laughter did not flutter briefly like the surrender flags Little Grace and her sisters had been taught to offer up at the right conversational moments. Instead, they wore their laughter, paraded it around, flew it proudly like the bright victory banners Little Grace loved to see mounted after hard-won battles atop the castle walls.

They were laughing now as one of the women held out her foot for inspection. “These are size tens,” she said. “If I’d had half a brain in my head back then, I would have realized I’d never fit into anything other than these comfortable old shoes I love to wear. But the size of my feet still didn’t keep me from trying on that glass slipper. That’s the power of The Story. The princess is the heroine, the one who always gets the rewards, and she has tiny feet. So if you’re someone who happens to want some of those rewards and the shoe fails to fit, what does that make you?”

“Right!” said another. “A stepsister.”

“And like those stepsisters, we’ve been lopping off unacceptable parts of ourselves for years,” said another. “The parts that ask too many questions or refuse to apologize.”

“The parts that want too much.”

“Or stick out too much.”

“Or not enough!” The women’s laughter was infectious. The audience began clapping its approval.

“We believed the entire time that we were wrong, when all along it was The Story— too narrow and conventional, that’s for sure, to include the likes of us!”

Little Grace thought about her own life, as The Story had defined it. She was a princess, one of the so-called lucky ones, who—as long as she obeyed the rules—was allowed her place in line for *happily ever after*. But Little Grace was now convinced that it was this very way of life that had

killed her mother. She remembered her mother, in the weeks before she died, calling her to her bedside.

“The Story is like a siren-song,” her mother had said to her. “You will be entranced by it, but you must resist.”

Little Grace pulled her chair closer to the bed. Her mother’s voice was weak, and she had to listen closely to every word.

“Your prince will tell you his home is his castle. But I want more for you than cooking and cleaning and spinning. More than becoming a slave, even for a prince or a king,” she had said. “I see so much of myself in you, Grace. It’s important that you carry on what I could not. It will take great courage, but you must do this for yourself—and other women, too.”

It was the first time her mother had called her, simply, Grace. Now as she listened to the women at the front of the room, it was as though light from hundreds of suns and moons was finding its way into the secret corners of her being.

“It’s a lonely thing,” one of these women was saying, “to reach out for new awareness, for a new level of consciousness, all on one’s own.”

Grace felt quick tears sting her eyes.

“But this is an important time for our planet,” the speaker went on. “For perhaps the first time in history, women are performing an evolutionary leap.” She paused. “Virginia Woolf once said, *We think back through our mothers if we are women.* When we root ourselves in the heritage of our mothers and grandmothers, when we recall the gold they were somehow able to spin from the chaff of their lives, the King and his pronouncements lose their hold over us. Women have begun to change, and we’re doing it collectively. Look around you at the others in this room.”

As Grace looked around through the blur of her tears, she saw women sitting on the edges of their seats, laughing and clapping, others with hands in the air waiting to be called on. One of her sisters turned around and grinned at her. The room was alive with excitement.

* * *

Never before in the wide, wide kingdom had so many princesses told the truth about their lives. One stood up to tell a story about broken promises, another about boredom so profound that her marriage had become a living death. Ariel said she had wanted to go into marine biology but was told it wasn't a proper field for a girl. Belle said she would no longer live in fear of a man. Rapunzel announced she would no longer live in fear of a woman. Briar Rose (the Sleeping Beauty) said in a strong melodious voice that it was now clear to her what a woman wants: to become the person she was meant to be. Then Snow White stood up to speak.

"There have been times in my marriage," she said, "when I think to myself, if my husband tells me one more time how fat I look, I will walk out of the house. Sometimes I believe all he wants is to put me on display, like a trophy he keeps around for show. I might as well be locked inside a glass display case!"

Her stepmother stood up when Snow White finished talking. "This may be hard for you to hear, Snow," she said, "but I want you to know I'm not the enemy. My husband, your father, used to treat me like a queen. Then not long after we were married, he began hitting me." She was quiet for a moment. "If you could see the bruises—the old ones and the new ones—on my body, you'd think I'd been shoved off a cliff." She reached out for Snow White's hand. "I can't stand to look at myself anymore. I smashed every mirror I own."

The two women embraced, and the room was quiet. Then someone at the back of the room called out, "Yes! Smash the mirrors!" and in a minute the entire room had taken up the chant.

Grace was smiling broadly. They were through with the looking glass. It had shattered to smithereens.

* * *

The day after the convention dawned breezy and overcast. Grace couldn't remember whether she had packed her umbrella. She hesitated at the castle's front door, gathering her courage. It helped to think about her sisters, only one of whom—the shy one—was staying home to take care of the aging King. Minutes before, Grace had checked in on him once again. He was still snoozing peacefully in his bed. She took this as a sign that perhaps, at the deepest level of his dreams, he was finally ready to let his daughters go. She placed a kiss on his warty nose and decided that

when she got to her destination and found a room of her own, she would write him the long letter he surely deserved.

Now she stood in the doorway, looking out. The tops of the trees were swaying back and forth, and Grace could see the undersides of the leaves sparkling like silver. Or perhaps it was more like gold or like diamonds. She would have to look closely at this new world with its endless fascinations, its curving paths and ever-changing skies. She would have to write it all down in her notebook.

She adjusted the straps on her backpack and stepped out the door.