

The Haughty Princess

by Deirdre Sullivan

There are stories we tell ourselves. And stories we are told. I am in a story that gets told. This story is called ‘The Haughty Princess’. It is the story of a princess who thinks she is too good to marry the princes who come to call, and of how her father makes her marry a beggarman. And how that beggarman makes her feel bad about herself, makes her feel small and silly. And how when she feels bad enough, and small enough, and silly enough, he tells her he is a king after all, and she doesn’t have to be a beggarman’s wife. She could be the wife of a rich king. And her lesson is learned, and they live happily ever after. Doesn’t that sound nice?

That is the story that gets told about me. And for a while, I believed it. That I was haughty. That I was proud. That wanting things was something I should be ashamed of. That I should be glad to marry any man my father chose.

In my father’s kingdom, the stories we tell about boys are different from the ones we tell about girls. We tell boys they can grow up to slay

dragons, fight battles, win bets, earn a better life than the one they were born into, marry princesses, become kings, even. If they're brave enough, and clever enough, and persistent enough.

I didn't want to slay a dragon or fight a battle. I didn't like hurting other living things. Though... there had been times when I wouldn't have minded hurting my father. It used to make me angry, the way things were. I felt like the castle was a glass bowl, and I was swimming round and round inside and always ending up in the same place, no matter how hard I tried.

In my father's kingdom, the stories we tell about girls are different from the ones we tell about boys. A girl can be a prize that someone earns, if she's pretty enough, or sweet enough, or rich enough. Pretty is something men get to decide in my father's kingdom.

My father was the King. It made him look good for his daughter to be pretty, and so the way I looked became what pretty was. The beauty standard.

My father was the King. He was rich. So I got to be rich. It wasn't my own money, but enough of it would go to my husband when I married for that not to matter.

I wasn't sweet, though. I couldn't be. I tried, but I would always end up doing something or saying something or wanting something that wasn't right. To ride my horse. To steal my brother's bow and arrow. To not be married off to a stranger. Even what I ate could be wrong, if I enjoyed it too much or too little. Too greedy, too ungrateful. It's hard to be sweet when the world seems designed to make you sour.

I could be quiet. And keep my eyes cast down. But not forever.

And when I turned fifteen, my father decided it was time for princes to come calling. He would let the ones he liked meet me, and I could

pick one of them. But I didn't want to get married. Didn't want to have to start having children of my own, or having to do what I was told by a husband. One was too tall, the other too short; one had too small a mouth, the other smelled funny. Rejection upon rejection. I could see my father getting frustrated with me. I was supposed to choose someone, not no one. He felt that giving me a choice was kindness enough, you see. So many other princesses didn't get to choose.

It was when I rejected a king for having an overly fancy beard that my father lost the plot altogether and roared at me that the next person who came was going to have me. Have me, he said. Like I was a sandwich, not a person. I could feel the tears behind my eyes. I would not release them. I bit my lip and stared ahead, as though it made no difference to me. I suppose that's part of why they called me haughty too. I always liked to hide my heart away. It was not for everyone.

So, the beggarman came, and right away I knew something was up. My father wasn't big on charity. But he was big on vengeance, so it could have been that, I suppose. I closed my eyes and got on with it. I thought I had no choice. And at that point, I didn't. There were no roads branching off my path. They came later.

He married me, he took me to his little house in the neighbouring kingdom, he made me clean and cook and sew and sell his pots at the market. He wasn't a bad man, the beggarman. He just wasn't for me. I did the things, though I was not very good at them at first. He would growl at me but never raised a hand to me or anything. He would say, "I never raise my hand to a woman," like it was a mark of character. Like I should thank him.

Day by day, I became more confident in the routine of what my life was now. The house was well-kept, and the food tasted better. My apron

was no longer full of holes. At the marketplace, I would call out proudly, “Pots and pans for sale,” and very often my arms would be empty coming home, my pockets full. I suppose I was getting too good at living the way my husband wanted me to live. Maybe he thought I was still too haughty for his tastes, too confident, too competent, too much. On my way to the market one morning before sunrise, I was knocked over by a drunken man who looked remarkably like my husband. He and his horse broke every single pot we had to sell, and when I stumbled home, bruised and furious, my husband sent me off, putting me to work in the kitchens of the castle. To earn a crust and, what’s more, to get a good long look at how nice it was, the life I could have had, if I had chosen the king with the fancy beard instead of being so proud and stubborn.

The work in the kitchen was hard and hot, but the food was good, and we could take home whatever the rich folk couldn’t finish. We would eat well. I filled my pockets with leftovers. But on my way home, who did I encounter but Mr. Fancy-Beard himself, who stopped me on my way and asked me to dance. When a king asks you to do something, it’s not a request, just a command with a question mark at the end of it. He took me by the hand and led me to an elegant ballroom full of Lords and Ladies, and he twirled me all around the dancefloor, so that the leftovers I had been saving spilled out all over the place and everybody laughed at me, of course. They still thought I was a servant then, you see, and had no issue making fun of someone poorer and ‘less important’ than they were. Of course, everyone is equally important. But that’s not the story people tell themselves.

Hot tears came to my eyes, and the king read them as sorrow, or shame. Which was good enough for him. I had learned my lesson. He then revealed himself to be the beggarman, the drunken man, my husband.

A fine trick had been played. He and my father had conspired for him to marry me anyway, no matter what I said. I wasn't that surprised. I had suspected something like that because the beggarman, the King and the drunken man all had the same face. They seemed to forget that I had eyes. What could I do, though? I smiled, pretended to be surprised and delighted and moved into his castle. To begin a happily ever after.

That is where the story people tell about me ends. But it is only the beginning, really. A wedding is a day. A marriage is a longer sort of thing. I had been confused, stubborn, frustrated and saddened by everything that was happening, but the first morning I awoke in the castle, I felt something else. A feeling that this was the only path I could have trod, with the way things were, the way the world was. No help and no escape. And with that came such anger. Not at the King, or my husband really, but at the structures that allowed them to get away with doing this to me. With treating me like I was less of a person because of the shape my body was the day that I was born. And I thought about all the stories I had heard from my nurse as a child, and how the princesses in them were gentle and good and beautiful and patient and never raised their voices. I thought about witches and stepmothers, and how the women with the most power always seem to be villains in these tales.

And I got out of bed, braided my hair, sat at my desk and began to write a new story. A story about a girl who found a way to escape the situation she found herself in. If she was clever enough, and if she was brave enough, and if she tried enough, I wrote, then surely she could make a future for herself where she mattered as much as any man. It might take time—and struggle. But she could do it.

And I was brave enough.

And I was clever enough.



And I would try. I was determined that no daughter of mine would have to live the story that I did. There would be a new one, for me, for her. For everyone. And maybe I was haughty to think that I could change the way things were. Or maybe haughty is just a word we use when women ask for what they need and want.

I needed change.

I wanted change.

We all did.

So I put down my pen and rolled up my sleeves.