



A Good Night's Sleep

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Retold Fairy Tales

Sharon loved fairy tales. Even in her twenties she still believed in the magical properties of pink tulle, fairy wings and unicorns. Her indulgent mother kept her darling girl safe from hags proffering bright red apples and the temptations of spinning wheels with sharp needles. The maternal goal of a fairy-tale wedding was achieved when Barry whisked Sharon off in his black Lexus, there being a shortage of white chargers in Gillingham at the time.

While they enjoyed a magical honeymoon, a builder friend added a turreted tower, access by spiral staircase, if you please, to Barry's all mod-cons home. Irena, the daily help, made sure that everything was in order for the happy couple's return.

Unfortunately all was not well. Sensitive Sharon found her new bed wanting. The elderly mattress seemed to contain not just the one pea required to induce insomnia in a princess, but a family sized bag of legumes. Or perhaps the ample divorce settlement had been insufficient and the spirit of Barry's ex-wife poked and prodded his new love all night long.

Barry was unperturbed. 'Not to worry princess, we'll go shopping.'

They spent a jolly Saturday afternoon in the department store, enthusiastically bouncing from open springs to memory foam under the disapproving tight lips of the department manager. Distaste was quashed as Barry's bankers approved their extravagance and the happy couple were directed to the bedding department. The sales assistant ignored Barry's stupor as she ran through the selection of duvet and pillow fillings. Privately he wondered if unicorn hair was a possibility and pitied the gaggles of naked baby geese who must be feeling the chill of a Siberian winter. Sharon seemed to have developed a hitherto undiscovered numeracy as she discussed thread count. They celebrated their purchases with champagne and oysters on the way home, a little treat for Barry's beloved.

The following day, after some difficult negotiations with a shifty Serbian, Barry arrived home to find his darling positively quivering with excitement. The new king size divan took centre stage in the opulent dark red and gold bedroom atop the turret. Feather pillows and a snow goose down duvet lay plumply encased in finest Egyptian cotton. Loyal Irena had stayed late and spent all afternoon arranging things to Sharon's satisfaction. Barry threw his giggling wife onto the divan, kicking his shoes off as he landed beside her. 'Best give it a test then princess.'

Poor Sharon tossed and turned all night. The duvet was too warm, the pillow too hard, the bed too soft. A well rested Barry left her snoozing, leaving early for a meeting.

'I'll get breakfast on the way princess, see you later.' He kissed her long blonde curls as he left the bedroom, pausing only to let Irena into the house.

A week later, Sharon was apparently still not sleeping. Barry had not noticed. If he did stir in the night, she seemed deep in the land of nod. She complained of nightmarish visions of incarcerating glass coffins and lurking evil. Irena sympathised and recommended an afternoon nap.

The bed-linen required laundering so Irena retrieved the care booklets she had carefully filed away. Having blotted her copybook by failing to hand-wash Sharon's honeymoon lingerie, reduced to a few flimsy threads by a mis-programmed machine, she since took great care with the laundry. Jobs at the generous rate Barry paid her were rare as hen's teeth. Whilst Sharon sipped the third double espresso of the morning, Irena read out some extracts from a sleep advice leaflet the shop had kindly included in the bundle of papers. Sharon was horrified to find that her sleep hygiene was less than satisfactory, resolving to bathe rather than shower before she retired each night. Irena related the importance of the correct bedroom ambience for a good night's sleep. Later that evening, Sharon raised the topic with her tired husband.

'Barry' his princess simpered 'I think it's the colour of our bedroom keeping me awake. Red's too stimulating.' 'Not for me darling it isn't' he laughed, changing his tune as her bottom lip started to protrude, ever so slightly. 'Up to you princess, you sort it out.'

Irena helpfully pointed out an article about feng shui in one of Sharon's magazines. The appointed designer, all tight trousers and chest hair, prescribed lilac and silver, some oriental artwork, scented candles and the removal of all mirrors. Especially the one on the ceiling. Sharon had never been entirely comfortable with the mirrors. Perhaps there was a wicked stepmother amongst her ancestors waiting for the right moment to step through a silvery looking glass and cast an evil spell.

The smell of paint set off undiscovered allergies that made Sharon sneeze all night. Barry gently snored in blissful ignorance.

‘Fabulous princess, slept like the proverbial.’

He kissed her and left for a meeting with the finance people who had been hassling for an appointment all week. Irena handed him a mug of coffee and a croissant as he left.

Sharon decided to consult her doctor, hoping for some pharmaceutical assistance. Helen McFarlane, newly qualified, was set upon popularity with her patients. Sympathetically nodding as Sharon relayed a sorry saga of sleeplessness, she dispensed another copy of the insomnia leaflet and advised some sessions with the practice counsellor. The on-site chemist was more helpful, selling her a supply of TV advertised sleeping tablets, forgetting to add the required warning not to use them for more than a couple of nights.

For a week, a medicated Sharon slept well in the marital bed, happy in her lilac sanctuary, whilst her husband was disturbed by dreams of meetings with the finance people. Irena had Barry’s morning coffee ready on the breakfast table every day, and introduced a bowl of fruit and yoghurt sprinkled with muesli to his diet.

Sharon slumbered late, finding that she needed three or even four espressos from the Italian coffee machine before she could get going properly. One day, as she was making her employer’s lunchtime cappuccino, Irena, who was actually a very intelligent girl, remarked on an article in the morning newspaper.

‘Sleeping tablets kill you.’

Sharon grabbed the paper in a manner not entirely befitting a princess. Research showed that people taking over the counter sleeping remedies had a shortened lifespan. Irena ignored the histrionics, beginning to find her employer’s behaviour tiresome. Had Sharon ever bothered to converse with her servant, she would have discovered that she employed a qualified pharmacist. Irena might then have explained that cutting out coffee would probably solve her wakefulness.

Lying in bed, flicking through a magazine which relied on mass interest in B-list celebrity lives, Sharon found an article on sleeplessness. She filled in the quiz, finding herself classed as a nightjar, sleeping all day and most active at night. Not at all appreciative of being categorised alongside an aging soft porn star and disgraced politician she read on to the helpful hints section.

Acupuncture was a suggestion, but one that Sharon’s dread of poisoned needles repudiated. Homeopathy was disregarded, not even an atom of poison would enter her body. She would start with aromatherapy and herbal remedies, which sounded much safer. Cat-wee scented chamomile tea was unpalatable. Ayurvedic head massage proved very relaxing, as was reflexology. The therapist cooed over her perfect little feet, perfect for glass slippers, and for kicking snoring husbands. Lavender and jasmine bath oil sent her to bed slippery and scarlet, but sleepy.

The itching drove her quite mad making her scratch all night. By morning poor Barry’s legs bore several vicious

bruises, so he was not at all sympathetic. Despite Irena's best efforts, the high thread count bed linen remained stained irrevocably and had to be sent to the charity shop.

Barry, in spite of his business distractions, noticed that his wife had dark rings under her eyes, a bald patch on her crown, and a nasty looking rash on her arms. Vexatious scratching, sniffing and coughing followed his princess from room to room.

Sharon spent every afternoon asleep compensating for her disturbed nights. Irena's hours were increased to keep the house looking presentable and to prepare some simple meals. This was not an onerous duty for Sharon ate very little and Barry's simple tastes were easily satisfied. She did not object to her increased pay, and gave notice at her other cleaning job.

Sharon's magazine suggested milky drinks at bedtime with turkey sandwiches. She gave Irena a long lecture about the sleep inducing properties of tryptophan, which explained why so many people fell asleep after Christmas dinner. Irena smiled politely, not liking to mention alcohol as the most likely festive sedative.

Barry objected to being fed turkey every night 'Princess, turkey really IS just for Christmas.'

Irena cooked him pies and stews instead. Now a full time employee, she was able to send hundreds of pounds a month to her family in Georgia. She started spending some of her wages on new clothes having carefully studied the fashion pages of the more up-market magazines Sharon liked so much.

The somnambulistic properties of Sharon's new diet proved elusive. A severe milk allergy had turned her irritating snuffle into a full blown past-nasal drip. Her nose was getting redder by the day, unsoothed by expensive potions. The nasty little rash evolved into a severe case of eczema which covered most of her body. Any form of depilation proved excruciatingly painful. Sharon's legs sprouted black hair at almost the rate at which long blonde hair blocked plugholes. Irena cleaned the house and cooked meals ready for Barry's return from work while Sharon slept almost all day.

Barry tried to talk to his wife about the business. Times were hard and he needed some wifely sympathy.

Sharon paid scant attention to her husband's grievances. For the first time in a while Barry took a long hard look at his princess, and didn't like what he saw. A wave of guilt washed these disloyal thoughts away.

He suggested a night cuddled up together in front of the telly, just like they used to. Irena cooked one of Barry's favourite TV dinners for them then retired to the kitchen with a glass of an excellent burgundy. Sharon's struggles for comfort forced Barry off the sofa. He slunk away, leaving her watching a shopping channel. She did not notice how close he and Irena were sitting when she burst into the kitchen with news of a hypnosis CD guaranteed to cure even the worst case of insomnia.

Listening to the CD worked in the short term. The mesmerising voice sent Sharon into a dreamy trance.

Counting downwards from three hundred, as instructed, her hoarse voice fell silent as she reached two hundred and fifty. Silence. The CD player switched itself off with an almost imperceptible click. Poor Sharon's pretty blue eyes opened wide and lashless in their bruised indigo sockets.

Barry enjoyed chatting to Irena over breakfast, finding her tales of Georgian life intriguing. He told her how much he appreciate her hard work and care for his beloved princess. 'Funny you should mention that,' she told him 'in Georgia I am daughter of royalty.'

Irena, ever caring, as are all the best servants, gave Sharon a newspaper cutting. New research revealed yoga to be a sure-fire cure for insomnia.

Yoga proved to be more difficult than Sharon thought. The worsening nasal discharge interfered with breathing into her chakras. Stretching her rash covered arms made the sores ooze nastily. The third session ended in disaster when her foot slipped coming out of downward dog, sending her crashing to the floor. A torn shoulder muscle added to her nocturnal torture. Barry, meanwhile, was making three trips a night to the ensuite. Strangely these were not noticed by Sharon who maintained that she slept not a wink.

Irena suggested that Sharon's injury might be helped by massage. She recommended her friend Katarina who pummelled poor Sharon mercilessly, misunderstanding pleas for mercy as expressions of relief. Arriving home early, Barry accepted Katarina's offer of a treatment, finding his sore muscles very appreciative of her efforts. Rather surprisingly, an unorthodox manipulation eased his prostate problems considerably.

Dr McFarlane recommended a cortisone injection for Sharon's torn shoulder. She herself was suffering from a lack of sleep caused by nocturnal comings and goings in the flat underneath hers. The recent drug squad raid seemed to have increased the problem. Her tiredness had given her a slight muscle tremor, so that the hypodermic syringe aimed at the synovial capsule in Sharon's shoulder bounced off the bony joint, tearing the membrane as it went.

The codeine made Sharon very groggy. Barry decided that she needed a live in companion. Although his business was flailing in a choppy market there was still the chance that he might be called away overnight. Irena moved into the spare room, investing the amount she saved on rent in some very classy outfits.

After an unexpected deal with a Chinese entrepreneur, Barry's business was back in the black. He wanted to celebrate. Sharon was not fit to be seen in public. Anyway she was snoring on the sofa when he arrived home. He invited Irena to join him for dinner. His favourite Michelin starred restaurant just happened to have a table available. The local doctor who had planned to celebrate her thirtieth birthday there had been arrested during a drugs raid in her apartment block

Irena looked stunning. Sharon woke as they left, catching Irena's reflection in the hall mirror.

When they returned home, accidentally having left some of Irena's very expensive clothing in the back of a black cab, they found Sharon collapsed at the bottom of the spiral staircase.

The paramedics were visibly shaken by her appearance, wondering if Barry and Irena had taken pity on some bag lady. Covered in weeping sores, the poor bald woman was delirious, moaning something about wicked stepmothers.

Sharon fell into a coma which defied all medical intervention. Her wounds healed well and her hair grew back. After a while Barry stopped going to see his sleeping beauty, preferring the company of his real princess.

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