



Ash, or the Gowns from a Tree

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Retold Fairy Tales

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There once was a boy who wished for a ball gown. His name was Ash, and he thought himself the ugliest creature in the world. He hated his clothes, his hair, the shape of his body. Whenever he caught sight of himself in a shiny kettle or the water in the well, his stomach would turn sour and he would run away. He was named for the ash tree under which his mother was buried, but whenever he spoke his own name – Ash – all he could picture was dirty sweepings from the fire.

So, when he saw his stepmother and sisters getting ready for the Three Day Ball, he balled his fists until the nails dug grooves in his palms.

“If only I were a girl and could wear a ball gown,” he thought. “I would be beautiful, too.”

Then he went and sat beneath his mother’s tree, weeping angry tears.

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The ball, you see, was for women only. The King was worried about his son. The Crown Prince had flatly refused to marry all the Princesses, Landgravines, Infantas and Dauphines the country's allies had sent. So, he had invited every eligible woman in the kingdom – with their chaperones – with instruction that the Prince must choose a bride from among them by the end of the three days.

Meanwhile, the Crown Prince was miserable. How could he tell his father that no woman on earth would be right for him? His heart simply wasn't made that way.

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Under his mother's tree, Ash watched the sky turn from pink to purple.

“Mother, if only I had a ball gown, I could go to the palace and dance. And, just for one night, I would be beautiful.”

To Ash's astonishment, there came a creaking, cracking sound, and a door opened in the trunk of the tree. When Ash looked in, there was a ball gown of silver and white lace, with silver slippers to match. Ash held the gown against his body. Dare he? Before he could change his mind, he took the gown and slippers, and hurried to his sisters' room. There, before their looking glass, he changed into the marvellous gown. He brushed his hair and arranged it high with combs and ribbons. He whitened his face with powder and rouged his lips into a perfect rosebud. Then he hailed a sedan chair and headed for the ball.

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The Crown Prince could not believe when Ash curtsied before him. How was it that a woman was stirring up these impossible feelings? There was a fluttering in his heart that was completely new.

“May I have this dance?” The Prince bowed.

Ash blushed and curtsied again. Then held out his arms in elegant style as the Prince whirled him about the floor. He couldn't speak. He had never felt so beautiful. Then he caught sight of himself in one of the ballroom mirrors. He was no beauty. He was Ash in a dress. The Prince would see through his disguise any moment and despise him.

"Excuse me," he mouthed, and fled the ball.

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"Who was she?" was all Ash's sisters would say when they got home.

"The most beautiful woman at the ball, without doubt. The silver gown, those beautiful slippers!"

"The Prince smiled for her as he did for no one else. Did you see them dancing?"

"I wonder why she ran away..?"

The most beautiful woman at the ball? Ash ruffled his hair to hide his blushes. Perhaps he could go again tonight? He would go back to his mother's tree.

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The Crown Prince's heart rose to his throat when he saw his partner of the previous night in an even more marvellous gown of gold embroidered with turtle-doves, and walking in golden slippers.

"Who are you?" The Prince whispered in Ash's ear as they waltzed in each other's arms. "You're unlike any woman I've met."

"My name is Ash."

Ash tried to lighten his voice, but he saw the Prince's eyes widen, then soften.

"Perhaps you're not a woman at all," he said, mischievously.

"I have to go."

Ash gathered up his skirts and fled the ball.

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He couldn't stop thinking about the Prince. To return to the ball was to risk exposing his secret, to be exposed to public shame. Surely that was worse than being ugly. Yet he couldn't help remembering the Prince's smile, the touch of his hand. The Prince liked him. But did he only like the illusion in the ball gown, or would he like Ash for who he really was?

There was only one way to find out.

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"You came back." The Prince was holding Ash gently in his arms as they whirled beneath the chandeliers. "Look, I've guessed your secret, but I haven't told you mine. I don't love women. I love...I think I love you, Ash. But I'd like to see your other face. If you'll allow me."

"I have to go," said Ash. But this time the Prince grabbed hold of his arm.

"But I'm ugly," Ash said.

The Prince shook his head.

"Let me be the judge of that. But honestly, Ash, I don't think anything about you could be ugly. Please. This could be my only chance of happiness. Maybe yours, too."

Could he refuse the Crown Prince? Ash was starting to believe that this man had already touched his heart.

"Very well, then. What do I do?"

The Prince smiled.

"There's a closet just through that door where they keep the footmen's uniforms. Take one and go out into the rose gardens to change. It's really private there. You could leave a trail of your slippers to help me find you."

Ash took a deep breath.

“Right, then. I’m going.”

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When the Crown Prince saw the handsome man in a blue uniform sitting among the rose bushes, his heart skipped a beat. Ash’s face was still powdered and rouged – very aristocratic – and he had tied his hair back into a queue with one of the ribbons.

“There you are!”

The Prince beamed. Ash stood, head bowed, fiddling with the lace on his cuffs. Before he could help himself, the Prince leaned over and kissed Ash softly on the cheek.

“You look wonderful,” he said.

“Really?” Ash raised his eyes.

“Really. I think I prefer you like this. But if you prefer a dress..?”

“I don’t know what I prefer yet. Except, perhaps...” Ash cleared his throat. “Perhaps you.”

The Prince kissed him again. He held up the slippers. They glittered like frost, or glass.

“I love these, by the way. Is that real diamond?”

“I don’t know,” said Ash. “They came from my mother’s tree. It’s magic.”

“So are you, Ash,” the Crown Prince said.

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