



Changing the Narrative

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Retold Fairy Tales

5 min read

Once upon a time a handsome prince rode up to an enchanted castle, his armour gleaming and his white horse strutting proudly beneath him.

The armour was actually chafing quite badly, and he could feel blisters forming under his layers of plate and mail. His father had been telling him to get out in it more, but it was so heavy and sweaty, and he hated all the brutish violence that was – he felt – misleadingly termed ‘the military arts’. Why couldn’t he learn about diplomacy instead?

He reached the forest of thorns that surrounded the castle and his horse reared majestically, cleaving the air with its hooves, its long silver mane streaming like a pennant in the breeze. The sudden motion caught him off-guard, and he was thrown to the ground in a clanking heap, right in the middle of a large, freezing puddle. The horse trotted off a little way, then found some tasty-looking grass and stopped to graze.

A bright peal of laughter rang out from somewhere nearby, and the prince struggled to his feet and cast around to find the source. Was it the evil fairy queen, come to battle him to the death? If so, she was being rather coy about it. He couldn’t see her anywhere.

‘Hey, up here!’

The voice that called out was sweeter than birdsong at dawn, and his heart lifted despite his wretchedness.

'Hello?' he called back, his voice coming out in an embarrassingly high-pitched squeak.

'Up here!' the voice came again, and his eyes were drawn upwards, to the single tall tower that rose above the forest of thorns.

His breath caught at the sight of the lovely maiden who stood on the balcony, her hair shining like spun gold and her skin glowing like rose petals in the sun.

'Aurora, is that you?' he cried, raising his hands in what he hoped was a chivalrous gesture of adoration. 'My love, I have come to rescue you.'

She was silent for a moment, gazing down at him in relief and profound joy... and then she burst out laughing again, almost doubling over with mirth and clutching at the rail of the balcony to keep her balance.

'Yeah, right!' she teased, once her giggles had subsided. 'You can't even ride a horse!'

The prince's cheeks burned with shame. He'd been mocked all his life – by his father, his younger brothers, even the servants – and now his betrothed was laughing at him too.

'Sorry,' the princess called, after the silence had grown awkwardly long. 'That was unkind. But seriously, how are you going to rescue me? You look like you've never worn armour before in your life.'

The prince shifted uncomfortably. 'No. I hate wearing it. And...' he swallowed nervously, 'I should probably warn you, I'm not very good with a sword. Sorry.'

The princess sighed in a resigned sort of way. 'Chuck it here then,' she said. 'Or can't you throw either?'

The prince perked up instantly. 'Yes! I'm good at throwing. My father insisted I learn.'

'Good. Go on then.' She held out her hands to catch it.

'But... but you're a girl.'

She huffed and planted her hands on her hips. 'So?'

'Well... aren't you supposed to be into flowers and... dresses and stuff?'

'I grew up in a rickety old cottage with three old women. Who do you think did all the hunting and wood-

chopping and fixing up the place? Now throw me. The sword.'

The prince did as he was told, hurling his sword like a spear over the tops of the huge thorns, with an ease born of long, enforced practice. He admired the graceful way she caught it in mid-air, one-handed.

'Thanks. See you in a few!' she called blithely, before disappearing into the shadows of her tower.

He was actually quite relieved that she was rescuing herself, and he set about building a fire and gathering nettles, wild mushrooms and herbs to make a soup. She'd probably be famished by the time she'd cut her way free.

Meanwhile, the princess was delighted with her fine new weapon. She'd only ever practised sword-fighting with a stick, since her godmothers didn't approve of girls owning swords. She swung the blade through the air, skewering imaginary foes, as she bounded down the winding stairs and raced across the dusty old great hall.

At the entrance she was confronted by the forest of thorns, and set about hacking her way through. She was strong from all the years of chopping firewood and doing DIY, and a few hours later she emerged into the twilight, sweaty and panting, her golden hair a mess of tangles with stray bits of bramble sticking out of it and her long skirts in tatters.

She spotted the prince crouching next to the fire, and she saw that he had arranged some fallen tree trunks into a seating area, and decorated it all with pretty wildflowers. He stood awkwardly as she approached and gave a shy smile.

'Hi,' he said. 'I thought you might be hungry.'

'Starving!' she grinned.

Just then there was a bright flash of green light and a puff of smoke, and the evil fairy queen appeared, cackling maniacally.

'Hahaha!' she said to the handsome prince. 'So, you thought you could steal the princess that easily?'

'Hey,' said the princess, brandishing the sword. 'Stop objectifying me. He's not stealing me, I'm breaking out.'

'But,' said the queen, 'he had to wake you with a kiss, to break my evil curse.'

'First of all,' retorted the princess, growing huffy, 'kissing someone when they're unconscious is creepy and wrong, and second of all, I wasn't asleep. What are you on about?'

The queen stared at her, perplexed. 'You pricked your finger on the spindle of a spinning-wheel—'

'Er, no,' said the princess. 'I've been making stupid dresses and spinning yarn since I was a child, since apparently that's the only suitable occupation for a girl. Why would I poke the sharp bit with my finger? That's just silly.'

The queen's shoulders drooped. 'But I cursed you, when you were born.'

The princess sighed impatiently. 'Just because people try to impose their expectations on you doesn't mean you have to go along with it. Honestly, I am capable of thinking for myself.'

The queen looked chastened, and dug at the ground with the toe of her shoe. 'Sorry,' she said. 'You're right. It's not fair to try and force people to conform to outdated stereotypes. All I ever wanted was to be accepted for who I am, not branded an evil queen just because I like wearing black and my laugh's a bit sinister.'

The princess reached out and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. 'Just be who you are. If people don't like it they can bugger off.'

The queen nodded, and a new light of hope shone in her eyes. 'You're right,' she said, squaring her shoulders. 'It's time I stopped letting society dictate how I live my life. I'm going to follow my lifelong dream and become a rally driver.'

And she disappeared in a puff of smoke.

The prince was staring at the princess, his eyes aflame with admiration.

'You're brilliant,' he said.

The princess blushed, smiling self-consciously. It was nice to have someone truly like her for who she was, and she decided that perhaps she would marry him after all. Although she resented having been married off before she was even old enough to speak, he really was very handsome and rather sweet, and he obviously knew how to cook judging by the delicious aromas that were emanating from the pot above the fire.

She went to hand him back his sword, but he shook his head.

‘It’s yours,’ he said. ‘You’re better with it anyway.’

They sat down to eat, and after a while the prince looked up to find the princess watching him.

‘I tell you what,’ she said. ‘I will marry you, if you still want to, but on one condition.’

His heart soared with hope. He really had fallen completely in love with her, but he hadn’t expected her to be interested in him in the slightest, since she was so brave and strong and clever, and he couldn’t even stay on a horse or swing a sword. ‘Anything,’ he said.

‘No more pretending to be something we’re not. I’ll go hunting and practise sword-fighting, and you can do the cooking and pick flowers and... whatever else you like to do.’

The prince’s eyes sparkled joyfully and he beamed at her, with a smile so bright it made her insides go all warm and tingly. Aurora put down her bowl of soup and leaned towards him, and they kissed beneath the stars as the sun slipped down below the horizon, and lived happily ever after.

The End.

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