

B is for Bedtime Stories

My father told wonderful bedtime stories.
Each night it was the same comforting ritual.

“What’ll it be tonight girls?” He’d commence
the routine.

“Princesses!” we’d shout in unison.

“Then princesses it is!” He’d dim the lights,
settle into his chair and ask, “Now how does it start?”

“Once upon a time Daddy...” I’d prompt.

“Oh yes, once upon a time. I see, well...”

Clearing his throat he’d begin. “Once upon a time there
lived a brave and intelligent princess.”

“And beautiful,” Casey would interrupt.

“Hmm?”

“She has to be beautiful!” We’d insist. This
was non-negotiable in any and all stories.

In the early days, my father (ever the feminist)
would try to convince us that a princess did not have to
be beautiful and that bravery and smarts were infinitely
more valuable. Those days went the way of *The Barbie
Ban*. Now misogynistic carcasses littered our bedroom
floor. Pink, frilly dresses clogged our closets. The high

moral fiber of my father's stories had been compromised.

"Of course Casey," my father sighed heavily, "the princess was intelligent and brave and beautiful."

Settings would vary, names would change but the plot was wonderfully predictable. Night after night, we happily received the generic tale of Cinderella-Snow White-Sleeping Beauty.

When I was eight (and Casey five) my father got a job singing at a dinner theater.

"Who will tuck us in?" Wariness spread from me to include Casey.

"You won't tuck us in?" Casey's indifference turned sour.

"I'll be working honey." He hugged her tight. "Your mother will tuck you in." Casey and I exchanged a furtive and fretful glance. This was not good.

The night of my father's first performance came a month later.

"Do you *goils* want a story?" *Goils* was the term my mother had coined when speaking to us en masse. She put Sammie, my youngest sister, in her crib and began tucking us in all wrong.

"Sure." Casey and I waffled between apprehension and dread. I went on the offensive and blurted:

"Mom, could it not be about Arvon?" Arvon was my mother's oft-mentioned "home planet". We were never completely sure she wasn't serious. I knew better than to request a princess story outright. Where my father would occasionally relent, set aside the parenting agenda and indulge us, my mother's position was clear and unflinching. Every interaction she had with us had a purpose, an intended outcome. There was no room for fancy. She seemed slightly annoyed at my audacity but considered my request.

“Fine. How about the Oregon Trail?” It was one of those questions that wasn’t a question. She turned off the lights, sat down and began her history lecture. Within minutes, the story had turned from Manifest Destiny to food shortages, broken wagons, deadly illnesses and the bitter cold. Then it went from bad to worse.

The first bedtime story my mother ever told us was of the Donner Party.

The next night, our minds still flooded with images of familial cannibalism (my mother had gone into great and academic detail) she told one of Aesop’s lesser-known fables: the one about Isadora Duncan, a great dancer, who died a horrible death when her scarf (a symbol of her vanity) caught in the wheel of her car and strangled her.

Over the course of my father’s short career as an entertainer, my mother must have told us hundreds of stories. I remember all of them. Many were of the Holocaust, including a large sub-section devoted entirely to the “experiments” of Dr. Mengele.

Once she told us about the Elephant Man. We were sad *instead* of terrified that night.

By the time my father had finished *My Fair Lady* and *South Pacific*, we were a pitiful combination of bloodshot eyes, frayed nerves and the jitters.

“You tell her. You’re older.” Casey pleaded one evening after dinner. The sun was setting. We didn’t have much time.

“Fine.” I snapped, “But you have to help.” She agreed and that night we attacked. Together we rallied every last whine, plea and tantrum. Finally my mother agreed to tell us a normal story.

“How about a princess story?” she asked in a cloying voice. Casey nodded excitedly and climbed in bed. Truth be told, I did the same. We should have known better.

“Once upon a time” my mother began. *It was too good to be true*, “there lived a beautiful princess named Ariana who wanted nothing more than to marry a handsome prince.” *So far, so good.*

“In a neighboring kingdom there happened to live a handsome prince and when he heard of Ariana’s beauty he asked his parents to send for her. When she arrived at the castle, Ariana and the prince fell instantly and totally in love. After a far-to-short courtship, they decided to wed.”

“Upon hearing of her son’s intent to wed Ariana, the Queen reminded the prince of their kingdom’s tradition. He could marry the beautiful princess of his choice as long as her...feet could fit into the ‘royal shoes’.” *This was different.*

Perhaps if we had been more awake or less naïve, we might have sooner realized this story was not quite what it seemed. My mother, being an exceptionally tall woman and having exceptionally large feet herself, had a *thing* about feet. Most might call it an obsession but compared to hailing from a planet no one knew existed, the foot thing was just a *thing*.

The story continued.

“The next day, over breakfast, the Prince presented the ‘royal shoes’ to his betrothed. Ariana looked closely at the shoes as her fiancée explained the custom. Ariana noticed that the shoes were dwarfishly small. She knew they would never fit her normal size feet.”

The sudden plot twist looped in my brain. Now I was awake. My mother, warming to the tale, continued almost rabidly.

“The Prince handed Ariana the shoes. She took them and tried to place one on her foot...” (Pause for effect.) “...It didn’t fit.”

I noticed that Casey too seemed suspicious. It was too late to stop her. Mom was on a roll.

“Ariana and the Prince were devastated. After all, he was handsome and she was beautiful. They belonged together. They had to get married.”

“Ariana moped all day long. At night she lay in her bed, tossing and turning, unable to sleep. Then just before the sun was about to rise, Ariana got an idea. Quietly, so as not to disturb anyone in the castle, Ariana slipped out of bed and sneaked out of her room.”

Now I was confused. The story was actually getting good. It had a plot and everything. She had to be up to something.

“Ariana tiptoed through the halls and down the stairs until she came to the castle’s kitchen. There on the counter she saw just what she needed...”

We were completely alert and sitting straight up in our beds. An impish smile crept over my mother’s face. My stomach turned.

“There on the counter, Ariana saw the solution to all of her problems...”

Here it comes.

“...a butcher knife!”

“Oh no!” I yelled, indignantly.

“Mom!” Casey protested.

She ignored us, racing towards the story’s crescendo.

“Ariana placed her foot on the butcher block, raised the knife and...”

“HACK, HACK!” Mom motioned wildly with her arm.

“HACK, HACK!” She cried again.

“The beautiful Ariana chopped three inches off her left foot.”

“Mom, please,” we begged.

“Howling in pain, Ariana forced herself to lower her left foot (which was gushing blood). Next she raised her right foot on to the counter and...”

“Mom, no!” We shouted again.

“HACK, HACK...”

We screamed. Sammie began crying in the next room.

“...she cut off three inches from her right foot! But Ariana was strong and didn’t faint, even though she was in more pain than she had ever known. Slowly she crawled back up the steps and down the hall, dragging her bloody, mangled feet behind her.”

My mother rose from her chair. She retrieved Sammie and held her gently. I can remember it vividly: my mother’s silhouette in the doorway; my heart racing; Sammie cooing serenely in my mother’s arms; a look of sheer terror covering Casey’s face as she stammered,

“Wh...wh...what happened t...t...to Ariana?”

My mother stroked Sammie’s hair and returned her to the crib. I was dumfounded. Not from the story. It was tame next to her horrific history lessons. I couldn’t digest the combination before me. Holding Sammie she seemed compassionate, knowing how (and wanting) to comfort her child.

I knew my mother was not a cruel woman. I think she honestly didn’t know she had been terrorizing us night after night. She thought she was teaching us. She was trying to show us that justice was more important than vanity; that dignity and survival win over pettiness and sexism. She thought she was expanding our worldview. She thought we were getting a kick out of it. I’m almost sure she didn’t mean us any harm.

“She fit into the shoes Casey.” My mother answered absentmindedly.

“Didn’t that hurt?”

“It hurt a lot.” I listened to the sounds of her putting my sleeping sister back to bed.

“Good night *goils*.”

“Mom?”

“Hmm?”

“Did it turn out okay?” I was hesitant. “I mean, did they live happily every after?”

“Of course, they just needed to build some ramps in the castle. Now good night, get some sleep.” She began to close the door.

“Ramps for what?” Casey asked from under her covers.

“For Ariana’s wheelchair.”

“Oh,” we said, our voices flat.

“Goodnight *goils.*”

“Goodnight Mom.”