

The Banished Princess

Once upon a time, somewhere in the middle of the wide ocean, a small princess navigated her little sailboat toward a moving speck on the horizon—something she thought just might be another boat. As she pulled the ropes to raise the sail up the mast, her heavy white princess gown with doily ruffles and poofy sleeves made her neck itch. If she could hear, she would have noticed the rasps and zips her dress made every time she heaved back the rope, crossing arm over arm. She squinted out at the horizon. It was definitely another boat, and the wind was taking her straight to it. She hoped that whoever it was, they would help her and not sell her into slavery, or worse, make her go home.

The princess came from a race of beautiful people who lived on the mainland, and she was the most beautiful child that any of them had ever seen. At least that's what her parents told her. As she grew, her beauty became more profound, her hair like spun gold, her skin was so fair it seemed to glow moonlight. People came from miles around just to look at her.

"How angelic," they would say. "She must be a goddess."

But the little princess could not hear their words of praise because she was born deaf. She saw that people bowed to her, stared at her, and practically worshiped her, but she didn't understand why they did it. It made her uncomfortable to be the center of attention all the time, and though she would have rather been alone in her tower, reading books or playing with her dolls, her parents forced her to stand at the grand balcony before audiences of thousands, from dawn till dusk every day of the week.

It was exhausting. The little princess smiled from time to time, but she couldn't hold it long before her face would sting and the smile dropped to a frown.

"I'd rather be reading," she would write to her mother. "Or learning. Or drawing a picture."

And her mother would tilt her head knowingly and say, "Dear, I'm afraid you're just too beautiful to have time for any of that. Your people need you."

Then came the day when, all the day long, the little princess looked like she'd eaten sour grapes. People showered her with praise and presents, but she didn't make any response.

Someone shouted out, "The princess is beautiful, yes. But she is not gracious."

Someone else responded, "Look at her face! She is vain, and we do not tolerate vanity! It's the law."

Then the crowd began to chant, "It's the law! It's the law!"

It was true. In this land of beautiful people, it was illegal to be vain. After all, it would be a catastrophe if everyone strutted around, fancying them self the prettiest or the handsomest. It would be a land of very shallow, self-absorbed people.

The crowd continued to chant, "It's the law!" Fists waved in the air, torches were lit, stones were hurled through the stained glass of the royal palace.

The king raised a hand to the masses and they listened as he spoke. "People. Understand me. It is difficult for my daughter to understand your praise because she is deaf."

Someone from the crowd hollered out, "That's no excuse! She ignores us because of her vanity! Death to the princess!"

The whole crowd started chanting: "Death to the princess!"

The king and queen pleaded with the crowd, but their fiery passion would not be extinguished. At last the queen negotiated a bargain. "It is true, my daughter has broken the law. But death is too harsh a punishment for one so young. I propose we set her adrift at sea. Send her into exile."

The crowd cheered. Arrangements were made and soon the little princess was put on a sailboat with enough food and water for a month. Her mother and father covered her in kisses, apologizing and promising to send someone to rescue her.

After 29 days at sea, the princess had lost hope that her parents would find her. A northerly wind had sent her south, farther than most boats went in those days, and she feared she would be lost forever in the nothingness of the sea.

But now, the speck on the horizon had come closer, so close she could see men on the deck of the black ship, all clustered at the starboard, studying her sailboat, which to them must look pitiful.

She waved her arms.

They seemed to signal to each other, and soon the great black ship was right alongside her sailboat. A plank extended from the ship and a tall, dark-featured man, slim as a blade of grass, walked up to her. The knife scabbard at his belt and his gold-dubloon necklace told her that this man was a pirate.

He spat off the side, then asked, "Are you a princess?"

The princess saw that he'd spoken, but didn't know what he said.

Another man from the ship hollered out, "Ask her if she's deaf!"

The tall man squinted at her. "Are you a *deaf* princess?" After a moment, he said, more loudly this time, "Are you a *deaf princess?*"

The princess gazed at him blankly.

He chewed on a toothpick, examining her.

"I think it's her, boys!" shouted the man. He flung the princess over his shoulder and returned to the deck of the black ship.

"Don't be scared," said the tall man, setting her down. "We'll keep you safe." Another man, this one short and fat with a doughy face like cupid, kicked the plank away and it splashed into the ocean. Other men gathered around the princess, all of them dark-featured and smelling of rotten cabbage and fish. "We's gonna turn you in for the ransom," said the cupid-faced man, whose smile resembled jack-o-lantern with brown, crooked teeth.

Although she couldn't understand much of what the pirates were saying, the princess did make out the word *ransom*. Someone had issued a ransom for her. But who?

The princess regretted sailing to their ship now. She could have outmaneuvered them in her sailboat. But what's done was done. Besides, her food and water had run out—a few more days on her own and she would have starved.

The princess pulled out a scroll of paper, a quill, and a small bottle of ink—items she always carried in case she needed to communicate to others, since she didn't speak.

She unrolled the scroll, dipped the quill in ink, and wrote, "Who is paying the ransom?"

The tall man picked up the scroll and examined it. He squinted at it and said, "HMMMMM."

The princess noticed he was trying to read it upside down. She turned it around for him and smiled politely.

"Oh yes," he said. "Of course." He looked at the scroll meaningfully, scratching his chin.

"What is it?" asked the cupid-faced man, "A map or something?"

"No," said the tall man. "It's writing."

"But captain, none of us know how to read."

The tall man took a deep breath and rolled his eyes to the man who'd spoken. "Yes, thank you for reminding us. But *she* doesn't have know that."

The cupid-faced man interrupted, "Cap'm, I think she's on to us."

The princess had her arms crossed, inspecting the tall man with unflinching eyes.

"Oh fine," said the tall man, "None of us can read, okay? Now don't you feel superior?"

"I don't think she can hear you, cap'm," said cupid-face.

One of the other pirates shouted, "I heard they done booted her out of her own kingdom for being too pretty!"

Someone else said, "Not for being too pretty, but for being a sour-puss!"

The tall man smiled. "That's almost right," he said, leaning down to the princess. "But I know the real reason you were cast into exile. Vanity. You love your pretty face too much."

"She is pretty," said one of the men.

"Yes," said the tall man. "But the ransom will only be paid if she comes back unharmed. Hear me? *Unharmed.*"

Everyone muttered, "Yes, captain."

The tall man scratched his chin, examining the girl. "Of course, that doesn't mean we can't teach you a little humility."

He smiled menacingly, and the princess felt a cold chill creep up her back.

The princess had no idea where she was being taken, but it seemed to her that every day they were getting further away from her homeland. Which, really, was fine with her. She never wanted to go back where people stared at her all day long, and got mad at her for no good reason at all.

The pirates made the princess do the most tedious tasks on the ship, like patching the sails, sealing leaks in the ship with hot tar. But she discovered that she liked working with her hands, even if they were throbbing and blistered from endlessly pulling ropes and scrubbing the deck. After several weeks, a funny thing happened, the work became easier for the princess, and she found that she actually took pride in keeping the pirate ship in good working order.

She wore the same heavy white dress since the pirates had nothing in her size, and by now it was tattered and smelled like chum, the poofy sleeves having long since been ripped off. When she looked at herself in the mirror, the face staring back at her was scratched and filthy, her once-golden hair matted like brown seaweed, her teeth yellowing there were no toothbrushes on the ship. In short, she was becoming less beautiful, and it made her feel like an entirely new person. As if she could reinvent herself. Do anything. Maybe even learn to speak.

She watched the pirates' mouths when they spoke to each other. She imitated the way their lips moved, squeezing her stomach until she felt vibrations tickling in her throat. She practiced speaking every day, but she had no way of knowing whether or not it was speech that came out of her.

One day, she confronted the tall captain and said, Hello Captain. At least, that's what she was trying to say. The tall man's eyes grew wide and he took a step back. The princess recognized that she'd probably butchered the words. So she gestured to her throat and moved her lips. The tall man looked confused. He said something she didn't understand. He repeated himself, kneeling down to her. This time she read a few of the words on his lips: *learn to*

talk? The princess nodded, smiling. Yes, she wanted to learn to talk. She hoped he understood.

The tall captain did, in fact understand the princess. And he felt sorry for her because he saw that she was a very hard worker, and didn't seem to be concerned with her appearance at all. Perhaps she hadn't deserved to be exiled from her kingdom after all. But what's done was done. He could not return her to her home. That would be out of the question, the crew would mutiny. The least he could do now was to help her learn to speak.

They worked nights, while the rest of the crew slept. He taught the princess how to form basic vowel sounds, then they moved on to consonant sounds. Soon she was forming words, phrases, whole sentences. In the midst of all her learning, something unexpected was happening: the captain was learning to read. He didn't realize it at first, but since the princess wrote down all the words and sounds she tried to say, he learned to recognize the letters and memorized their meaning.

In this way, the princess learned how to read lips and speak with perfect enunciation, and the pirate learned how to read.

At last, they were able to communicate with one another. Their midnight sessions became more conversational. One night, the princess asked the captain the question that had been burning inside her all the time she'd been on this ship: "Who is paying for my ransom? Is it my parents, the king and queen?"

The captain's face fell grim, and he looked as if he might be sick. "I'm afraid not," he said. "I don't know much about this payer, but he is certainly no king."

The princess felt sweat forming on her forehead. She felt heartbroken and terrified at the same time.

"I'm sorry," said the blade-thin captain, turning his gaze to the night stars. "You will meet the payer soon enough. We arrive tomorrow."

They docked in a strange city that smelled like cantaloupe and burning wood. A man in a dark cloak stood on the pier. The princess knew that he must be the one who'd put out a ransom on her head. She couldn't see his face. Her mind teemed with horrible possibilities as to what might come next for her. What if the cloaked man had heard of her beauty, and wanted to imprison her in a cage, like an exotic bird in some kind of freakish human zoo, for all to gaze upon in wonder and pity? Or what if the cloaked man was a sultan who collected princesses for wives and forced her to join his harem? What if the man just wanted to chop her up into little pieces and use her for shark bait?

The princess tried to stop her imagination from running away from her. If she was going to escape, she had to think clearly.

The captain tied the princess' hands behind her back just to make sure she wouldn't try anything sneaky. He escorted her down the ship's plank and onto the dock. The tall captain stepped in front of the princess. She couldn't tell what the cloaked man was saying, or if he was speaking at all, since she couldn't see his face. But evidently they had some sort of exchange because from within his cloak he produced a burlap sack stuffed with something that looked heavy. The captain handed the sack to his pirates. They plunged their hands inside the sack and pulled out handfuls of gold coins. After they hauled the sack onto the ship, the captain tipped his hat to the cloaked man and smiled slyly.

"Now!" he shouted.

The pirates cut the rope anchoring the black ship to the harbor. The captain flung the princess over his shoulder and seemed to fly up the plank just before it splashed into the water.

Before the princess knew what happened she was back on the ship's deck and they were floating away. The captain had saved her! Her heart leapt and she threw her arms around him.

"I told you we'd keep you safe," he said.

"Thank you," she said aloud.

As the black ship drifted from the harbor, the princess gazed back at the dock and the cloaked man who stood there. She was glad to have not been sold for shark food, but what was she going to do now? Her kingdom despised her, her parents had forgotten her. Now her only family was the tall captain and his foul-smelling crew.

Just then the ship jolted to a halt, tossing everyone to their backs.

"That scheming man in the cloak tied a rope to the rudder!" shouted a pirate.

"Cut it!" hollered the captain.

"It's too low. We'd have to jump ship," said the pirate.

The black ship wasn't far out from one of the docks, where a mob of goons was forming. One flung a grappling hook out to the ship and it stuck firmly in the wooden hull. The goons all grabbed the rope and heaved the ship to the dock.

On deck, the pirates grew quiet and unsheathed their knives. Their faces became solemn like statues. They knew they were outnumbered, but none were willing to surrender themselves, or the princess, without a fight.

The princess shrank into a far corner of the ship, hoping she might go unnoticed.

A plank clapped down on the starboard side of the ship and the weight of soldiers' climbing up rocked the black ship. The first to emerge was the cloaked man, followed by several goons. The pirates raised their knives and reared back to leap.

Then the cloaked man took off his hood. It was not a man at all.

"Mother!" shouted the princess.

The Queen opened her arms and the princess leapt into her embrace. "You can talk," she said, rubbing soot from her daughter's face.

"The captain taught me how," said the princess.

The captain scratched his chin, visibly confused.

The queen approached him and touched his arm, prompting him to put away his knife.

"Thank you," she said. "You returned my daughter unharmed, just as you said you would. For this you will be rewarded."

After a pause, the cupid-faced pirate blurted, "You're the queen? I thought you was a man."

The captain kneeled and bowed his head out of respect for royalty, as did all the pirates.

The queen explained that she and her husband had devised a plan to bring their daughter back home safely. Since the king and queen would have been though hypocrites by their people if they'd issued a ransom themselves, the queen had heralds announce that a ransom would be paid by an unknown man for the safe return of the princess. The goons who had stormed the ship, it turned out, were royal soldiers dressed in plain clothes.

"And now I see," said the queen to the captain, "That your devotion to my daughter's protection knows no bounds. Although you were about to get away with my money, you risked yourself and your crew to save her. This devotion will be rewarded."

The queen took the princess back to their kingdom. The king made the pirate captain, as well as all the other pirates, the princess' personal body guards, should the public ever turn on her again.

The royal family announced to the people that the princess had miraculously found her way back. When the people saw the princess' scruffy appearance, they pitied her. "What have we done to this poor child?" they said. They realized they had put her through much pain, and now that she was home they brought gifts and set them below the grand balcony, begging for her forgiveness.

The princess smiled when they came because she could understand their words. She would read *I'm sorry* on their lips and she'd shouted out, "You're forgiven!" This made the people fall in love with her all over again. Still, the princess refused to spend all her time on the balcony, and took up oil painting, kite-flying, swimming, French, and the recorder.

She excelled at everything except the recorder.