

The True History of the Picky Princess by John Morressy

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According to the lessons of the Trojan War, we should be wary of Greeks bearing gifts. A recent birthday card cleverly updated that warning to tell your editor to beware of geeks bearing gifts. But nobody ever said anything about fairies...

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A handsome king and his beautiful queen had one child, a daughter, whom they resolved to cherish and protect and indulge as their greatest treasure.

Following ancient custom, they invited the good fairies of the kingdom to her christening. They did this not merely to safeguard themselves and the child against a breach of etiquette and the unpleasant consequences thereof, but also in the confidence that good fairies could be counted upon to bestow desirable gifts.

There was a small kingdom. Only three fairies resided within its boundaries. They were sisters, very talented, and reputed to be generous toward newborn children, especially those of the better sort.

The fairies arrived separately and greeted one another cordially, but with no display of sisterly warmth. There was, in fact, a definite coolness in their relations, for they were highly competitive, and each believed that her area of specialization was insufficiently respected by her sisters. All three were touchy about what they considered the petty jealousy of the other two.

Delighted by the presence of the three sisters, the king and queen were oblivious to the frosty atmosphere. Had they been more observant, they might have had second thoughts about the invitation. But kings and queens have a way of seeing what they wish to see, rather than what is occurring before their eyes. Their attention was focused on gifts, not the givers.

Custom, and in some places, law, dictates that all good fairies be beautiful, dress in splendid gowns of moonbeams and gossamer, and have mellifluous and endearing names. The sisters observed the first two precepts to the letter: they were stunning beauties, impeccably groomed and magnificently attired. But they had no fondness for the kind of names popular among the fairies. "Titania" and "Gloriana" were tolerable, but only just; "Tinker Bell" they considered insufferably winsome, and "Puck" downright silly. They had chosen names they judged more suited to their station.

When the welcoming ceremonies were complete, and they were standing over the crib of little princess Infatuata, the oldest sister, Splendor, said, "I shall bestow on this child the gift of a lifetime of breathtaking loveliness. To the end of her days, no woman will ever surpass her in beauty." She turned to her sisters and with a benign smile said, "And what comparable gifts do you propose for this dear child?"

Scintillata, the second sister, gave her a cool glance. "Beauty is a pleasant acquisition, Splendor dear, but one must be constantly aware of it if she is fully to savor it. Therefore, to make up for your oversight I will give the little darling the gift of unshakable self-esteem."

The two then turned to the youngest sister, Exquisitina, and favored her with smug looks. "Your gift, dear sister?" said Splendor, and "Think carefully," said Scintillata.

"Unlike some people I know, it is my custom always to do so," said Exquisitina. "It is advisable for a princess to be beautiful, and sensible for her to be aware of her beauty, but it would be foolish indeed to waste a lifetime of beauty on the indiscriminating. I therefore give the child the gift of pickiness. She will never be satisfied with anything but the absolute best, especially in her choice of a consort."

The king and queen were delighted. They felt that they could not have asked for more. They lavished gifts upon the three good fairies, who accepted them graciously and departed on their separate ways.

Within six months, for reasons that were never made completely clear, the sisters had a terrible falling out. Words were spoken that made reconciliation impossible. They moved to lands far distant from one another, and were heard of no more.

The king and queen did not care. In truth, they were relieved. The fairies had done all that was expected of them, and had they remained in the kingdom and seen their gifts come to fruition in the Princess Infatuata, there was no telling what airs they might have assumed.

For Princess Infatuata grew up to be an extraordinarily beautiful young lady. She exhibited excellent taste in every choice she made, and her parents, being a king and queen with a royal treasury at their disposal, were able and willing to indulge her most exacting demands. She was so lovely that the people did not grumble at the frequent levies placed upon them in order to fulfill her whims. They took pride in knowing that their little kingdom was home to the loveliest princess in the world.

Infatuata, her parents, and their kingdom got along very happily through the years of her childhood and adolescence. As long as the little princess appeared in public now and then and the people had a good look at her, they were content. All things considered, the kingdom was a happy place.

When Infatuata reached the age of sixteen, the king and queen decided that it was time to begin planning her marriage. It went without saying that Princess Infatuata would settle for no ordinary husband. Only the finest, boldest, bravest, handsomest of men could aspire to her hand, and he must be nobly born, wealthy beyond imagining, and renowned for his great deeds and splendid character before he could be considered a worthy suitor. He must also be besotted with love for the princess; but that, everyone knew, would follow inevitably from a single glimpse of her.

The king and queen sat down with their wisest councilors to draw up a list of eligible princes. Applying the most stringent criteria, and always subject to Infatuata's veto, they came up with forty-three finalists. Messengers were then sent forth to deliver the invitations to a solemn ceremony at which the princess would be presented and the competition for her hand would be declared officially open.

After the usual delays and complications due to weather, traveling conditions, difficulties of communication, wars, and mistaken addresses, the eligible princes at last assembled in the palace on Princess Infatuata's seventeenth birthday. In the courtyard, steeds pranced and golden armor glittered. Within the great hall, resonant voices crossed and recrossed in brilliant, witty conversation. Eyes sparkled and teeth gleamed in the light of nine thousand candles and three thousand and eleven torches. The magnificence and splendor of the scene were unparalleled.

"We have brought together the best and the brightest, the boldest and noblest, the truest and the bravest, and also the handsomest, richest, and most powerful young men in the world," said the king, looking down on the assembled princes with Infatuata at his side. "What think you of them, my precious jewel?"

"Passable, Daddy," she said. "Just barely passable."

"I agree, dear, but this is the pick of the lot. I don't believe we'll find any better," said the queen.

The princess sighed. "I suppose not."

"And you do have to get married."

Sighing more deeply, Infatuata said, "I suppose so."

"I have thought long and deeply about the selection process," said the king. "We must set your suitors a task to perform as proof of their devotion. A bold feat to accomplish, a quest to go on, something like that."

"The usual thing is to make them go out and slay horrible monsters!" said the princess, clapping her hands in delight. "Let's do that."

"The only horrible monsters I know of are those dragons up in the mountains, and not one of these lads is a match for the smallest of them."

"Then they're certainly not good enough for *me*."

"No one is, my priceless treasure," said the queen, hugging her daughter. "But we must be practical. You've got to marry someone, and if the best available all get themselves eaten, there won't be anyone worthwhile left."

"A sensible observation," said the king. They all pondered for a time, and then he asked, "How about making them solve three riddles?"

Infatuata looked at him in alarm. "I don't want a husband who's too clever."

"That's no problem. Eliminate the ones who solve the riddles, and pick from among the others."

"I don't want to marry a dolt, either."

"She has a point there," said the queen. "Riddles won't do."

Once again they were all silent for a time. The princess sighed once again and said, "I suppose I absolutely must marry."

"Yes, my dear. Otherwise our line will die out. And I don't believe you'll ever have a better selection."

Infatuata stamped her perfectly shaped, dainty little foot and said, "Then I'll set them a task. But it won't be an easy one."

"Why should it be, my pet? You are the most desirable princess in the world, and a man ought to be willing to face horrifying dangers and excruciating hardships to win your favor," said her father, patting her cheek.

"I'll make them get me things. I'll require that they bring me back Medusa's comb, a cloak made of phoenix feathers, slippers of chimera's hide, and a drinking vessel made from the horn of a unicorn."

"Good. That's all useful stuff. But don't make it so easy."

They thought for a time, then Princess Infatuata burst into a merry laugh. "And they must swear to accomplish all this in twenty-four hours, or never to look at another woman in all their lives!"

"Oh, very good! What a wise little daughter you are, my paragon!" said the queen. "Do you think it might be a good idea to demand that those who fail forfeit all their worldly goods to you, as well?"

"Of course. In fact, I'll just require that the failures go off and hang themselves."

"An excellent idea, my sweet child, but impractical," said the king. "It might create hard feelings on the part of our neighbors. Let us do as your mother suggests."

With a careless gesture, Infatuata said, "Whatever you like, Daddy. I really don't care."

He took her arm, chuckling all the while, immensely pleased with his daughter's good sense. "Come, let us descend and announce our conditions."

As they passed through the crowd of handsome eligible young princes, a murmur of appreciation followed their progress. Whispered superlatives and sighs of longing were heard on all sides. Gorgeously gowned and heartbreakingly beautiful, Princess Infatuata strode through the crowd with her head high, eyes fixed straight before her, favoring no prince with so much as a glance.

The king ascended to his throne and raised his hand for silence. The princes gathered around, elbowing one another like commoners to obtain an unobstructed view. Following the king's brief welcoming speech, his herald read off the conditions for seeking the princess's hand. A profound silence followed, and lasted for an uncomfortably long time.

It was broken by the Prince of the Windswept Isles, who stepped forward and said, "I assume that these conditions are negotiable."

"Certainly not," said the king.

"You'll have to extend the time limit. I'll need at least a year to get those things," said the Prince of the Dark Valley.

"More like five," an unidentified prince shouted from the crowd. Others called out in support.

"Out of the question," said the king. "For anyone who truly loves my daughter, one day is too long to be away from the radiance of her presence."

The Prince of the Pebbly Shore said, "That part about forfeiting all our possessions has to go, Your Majesty. The princess is a lovely lady, no question about that, but I have obligations at home. I'm willing to risk a certain sum, not everything I own."

"Your objections attest to the shallowness of your affections," said the king, rising. "All who have spoken have revealed themselves unworthy of my daughter's hand. They may depart. The rest may remain and await further details."

An angry murmur arose from the assembly. A few of the princes laughed in unpleasant or scornful ways and started for the door. Others followed, though not without parting sighs and longing looks backward at the princess. The king and queen sensed that the mood was getting ugly, and slipped away with the princess, who seemed totally unconcerned.

Amid the resulting clamor and angry cries, the Prince of the Seven Sapphire Lakes climbed on a chair and announced, "My fellow princes, I have two sisters of marriageable age. I admit that their beauty does not equal that of the Princess Infatuata, but the same is true of every woman on Earth. That said, I give you my word that they are extremely comely, clever, and more than usually sweet-tempered, and the man who seeks their hand need not involve himself in a lot of crazy stunts, or ruin his life if he fails in his quest. What say you?"

His words were received with loud cries of approbation. A second prince made a similar announcement regarding his own sister, and a third spoke of his cousin, a princess in a neighboring kingdom who was stunning to behold, an excellent lutenist, a delight to converse with, and well schooled in the law, as well as having amiable and generous parents who could be counted on to treat a son-in-law with proper courtesy.

Caught up in a wave of enthusiasm, the princes were able to resist the undeniable attraction of Princess Infatuata, and the hall quickly emptied.

The king and queen were shocked at this display of callous selfishness on the part of young men of reputed good birth and upbringing. The princess merely smiled her dazzling smile and said, "Good riddance to them."

Word of the incident spread, and two years passed before another suitor visited the castle. The princess did not deign even to receive him. Broken-hearted, he climbed the highest tower of the royal palace and flung himself down, cracking the paving stones of the princess's favorite walk.

His inconsiderate behavior only made the situation worse. Two more years passed without a single prince appearing or a single inquiry about Princess Infatuata. Her parents grew concerned. Though they adored their daughter, they did not delude themselves about her ability to govern a kingdom alone. Her beauty was incomparable, but her statecraft was decidedly deficient.

"My dearest child, you are now twenty-one," her mother said to Infatuata on her birthday. "It's time that you found a heroic warrior with good administrative skills and settled down."

"Such men as you describe are invariably plain and dull and much the worse for wear," said the princess. "I will accept only a man of surpassing good looks who is prepared to devote his life to my happiness."

"Such a man might make a satisfactory husband, but he would make a very poor king. In fact, as I reflect on it, he would not be much of a husband, either. He would be constantly underfoot."

"It's no use, Mother. I was born to enjoy the very best of everything, and I intend to fulfill my destiny," said the Princess.

The king and queen were desperate. They no longer had any influence over the princess. Though her beauty would remain undiminished, Infatuata was getting on in years with no prospect of finding a suitable husband. Expert help was needed.

For some time, the suspicion had been growing in the minds of the king and queen that calling in the good fairies had been a mistake. But what magic had brought about, they told themselves, magic might correct.

The departure of the three good fairies had left a vacancy in the kingdom. It had been filled, in a fashion, only after nine years, when a good fairy retired to a cottage in the forest not far from the castle. Her arrival caused little stir, and practically no interest in her professional services. After nine years, the people had become accustomed to getting along without the assistance of good fairies, and seldom gave them a thought.

This was just what the good fairy had hoped for when she chose the kingdom. But she soon grew bored. Being a practical soul, she decided to pursue a new interest. She opened a bakery, which proved to be an instant success. As a neighborly gesture, she learned the birthday of every child in the kingdom, and to each child, on the appropriate date, she gave a special cookie. The ingredients were secret, but the results were spectacular: the child was healthy, happy, and well-behaved right up to his or her next birthday.

By the time the king and queen sought her aid, the fairy had become known as "Aunt Betty, The Cookie Lady," and her bakery was famous throughout the land. So esteemed was her pastry that almost everyone in the kingdom had forgotten that she was actually a good fairy. She was a great baker, and that was enough for them.

Betty Ann was as beautiful and ageless as all good fairies, but her taste was for subdued colors and subtle effects. Her apparel did not twinkle, nor did it sparkle. It did not even glimmer. It was attractive, but understated. Much of the time she wore an apron, and in place of the obligatory wand she employed a slender breadstick.

The king and queen had been aware of her presence in their kingdom, but it took a long time for them to reach the necessary stage of desperation to invite her to the palace. They did so in the most polite and flattering terms.

She turned down the invitation with equal politeness and flattery, explaining that she had given up good fairying long ago and wished only to concentrate on her baking. Along with her reply she sent a dozen of her most delicious cupcakes. The queen, close to despair, visited her cottage to appeal to her in person.

"Just this once," she said. "A quick visit. It would make my daughter so happy." She could not force herself to reveal the true problem.

"I might be a disappointment, Your Majesty," said the good fairy. "I can do wonders with cookies, but magic...." She made a wavering gesture with her hand, and shook her head slowly. "I've fallen out of practice."

"Just come to the palace. We ask no more," said the queen.

The good fairy wanted to be a good neighbor. She was also a savvy businesswoman, and was curious to see the picky princess of whom she had heard so much, and so she agreed to come to the palace the very next day.

When the king and queen presented her to Princess Infatuata, the princess was not impressed. In fact, she was downright rude. "I do not wish to meet this person. The company of anyone who calls herself â€˜Aunt Betty, The Cookie Ladyâ€™™ is certain to be tedious," she said.

The queen hurried to her side and whispered, "My precious, she is a good fairy."

"I find that difficult to believe. A good fairy would never choose such an unsuitable name. And just look at her outfit."

"I consider Betty Ann a very satisfactory name," said the fairy.

"Then you should be ashamed of yourself. And your appearance! You're wearing an apron in the royal presence."

"It is my custom to wear an apron."

"A good fairy should twinkle and gleam like starlight and moonbeams."

"I have never twinkled and gleamed, and I don't intend to. Go around twinkling and you never have a minute's privacy."

Curiosity overcame the princess's petulance. "Why would anyone want privacy? The whole purpose of life is to be surrounded by admirers."

The fairy was getting fed up with this treatment. With an exaggerated searching look around the chamber in which the four of them were seated, she said, "It is? And where are they?"

Before Infatuata could think of a crushing response, the queen said, "That's exactly the problem," and

went on to give their visitor a brief and surprisingly truthful account of the situation.

Of course, the good fairy had taken care to learn the facts beforehand. She knew them within minutes of the queen's departure from her cottage bearing renewed hope and another dozen cupcakes. With a wise and comforting smile, she said, "What you need is a cookie, my dear princess. I've baked one especially for you," and drew from her reticule a packet wrapped in pink paper and tied with an elaborate bow. She opened it to reveal a vanilla raisin cookie sprinkled with sugar.

"Ugh," said Infatuata.

"Ugh? Did you say 'Ugh,' my dear child?"

"I did."

"And what, precisely, was the meaning of this 'Ugh'?"

"You offered me a plain and common cookie. The commonplace has no part in my life. I am accustomed only to the best. My usual sweet is Charlotte Malakoff aux Framboises. The berries are picked under my father's direct supervision by the most attractive members of the court."

"Very discerning of you, my dear princess. But this is no common cookie. It is the solution to all your problems."

"Problems are for ordinary people. I do not have problems, I create them," said Princess Infatuata.

"How fortunate for you. But in view of your exquisite taste, I find your reaction surprising. This is an exceptional cookie, a wondrous cookie, a unique cookie. It is, in fact, the perfect cookie."

"It is?" said Infatuata, her interest piqued.

"Could I offer the Princess Infatuata anything less?"

The princess could not dispute the point. "Of course not. Perhaps I will take just a nibble," she said.

She took the cookie in a delicate hand. She broke off a tiny bit and placed it daintily on her tongue. After the first tentative bite, she gave a little cry of delight and gobbled down the entire cookie. "That was delicious!" she cried. "In fact, were it not for my duty to retain my perfect figure, I might be tempted to..." Here she paused for a great yawn. "How strange," she murmured. "My beauty sleep is not due for another twenty-six minutes, yet I feel an overwhelming drowsiness. You will excuse me."

The princess swept from the room in her customary manner. The queen turned to the good fairy and said, "What can be done for her?"

"It's been done."

"Already?" said the king, looking impressed. He was not accustomed to such efficiency.

"That was a magic cookie. Your daughter will sleep until those ridiculous gifts wear off."

"Wonderful! Oh, thank you, thank you," said the queen, tearful with joy. To her husband, she said, "We'd better start drawing up a list of princes right away."

"There's no rush," said the good fairy. "She'll be asleep for at least a hundred years."

"A hundred years!?" cried the king.

"Give or take a decade. She was overloaded with fairy gifts. Too many for the poor child to handle. I can't understand how responsible fairies could place such a strain on a baby, but that lot you had to the christening ... those three couldn't even choose sensible names for themselves. I hope they've found another line of work."

"Our beautiful Infatuata ... sleeping for a hundred years ... whatever shall we do?" sobbed the queen.

"Keep her comfortable, and dust her off every week or so. The magic will take care of everything else," said the good fairy, and with a wave of her breadstick, she vanished.

This all took place many centuries ago, and nothing further is known of Infatuata, her parents, or their kingdom from that day on. As far as anyone knows, Aunt Betty, The Cookie Lady, did nothing more in the magic line. She ran a successful bakery business for many years, and expanded into all the neighboring kingdoms. It exists to this day as a tiny part of a major international petroleum, pharmaceutical, telecommunication, and cookie conglomerate.

It is safe to assume that the princess awoke one morning as lovely as ever and very well rested, and once she had been brought up to date, married a suitable prince and settled down cheerfully to a comfortable life in a palace with all modern conveniences. She may even have lived happily ever after. People sometimes do.