

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.

In unison, we'd shout, "Princesses!"

"Then princesses it is!" He'd dim the lights, settle into his chair and ask in mock absentmindedness, "Now, how does it start?"

"Once upon a time, Daddy," I'd prompt.

"Oh yes, once upon a time. I see." 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 and pink, frilly dresses clogged our closets. The moral fiber of my father's stories had been compromised.

"Of course, Casey," my father would sigh 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 would happily receive the generic tale of Cinderella-Snow White-Sleeping Beauty.

Then my father got a job singing at a dinner theater.

"Who will tuck us in?" I asked.

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 tightly. "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.

After putting Sammy in her crib, my mother asked, "Do you *goils** want a story?"

A cloud of apprehension and dread settled over us and, after an awkward silence, I murmured, "Sure."

"Very well," my mother said as she began tucking us in, with none of the care and panache my father showed.

When it came to bed-tucking, my father was like a butler with ambiguously magical powers—sort of a younger brother of Mary Poppins. My mother, on the other hand, *poked* rather than tucked, and showed all the care of a prison warden.

* "*Goils*" was the term my mother had coined when speaking to us *en masse*.

I went on the offensive and blurted, “Mom, could it not be about Arvon?”*

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 according to my mother) caught in the wheel of her car and strangled her.

* 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.

** A group of pioneers who got stuck in the snow and ate each other. Why they called it a “party” is beyond me. Casey thinks it's because it was the birthday of one of the pioneers. Some birthday.

Over the course of my father's short career as an entertainer, my mother must have told us hundreds of stories. I remember each and every one 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, so we were despondent 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.

The sun was setting. We didn't have much time.

"Fine," I snapped. "But you have to help."

She agreed and that night we synchronized our attack. 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 into bed. Truth be told, I did the same. We weren't the smartest children in the world, but even so, we should have known better.

"Once upon a time," my mother began (and it seemed too good to be true), "there lived a beautiful princess named Arianna 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 Arianna’s beauty, he asked his parents to send for her. When she arrived at the castle, Arianna 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 marry Arianna, the Queen reminded the prince of their kingdom’s tradition. He could choose any princess he fancied, as long as she 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 would call it an obsession, but compared to hailing from a planet no one knew existed, the foot thing was just a thing.

The story went on.

“The next day, over breakfast, the prince presented the ‘royal shoes’ to his betrothed. Arianna looked closely at the shoes as her fiancée explained the custom. Arianna noticed 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 fully awake.

My mother, warming to the tale, continued almost rabidly. “The prince handed Arianna the

shoes. She took them and tried to place one on her foot." *Pause for effect.* "It didn't fit."

Now, even Casey seemed suspicious.

It was too late to stop her. Mom was on a roll.

"Arianna and the prince were devastated. After all, he was handsome and she was beautiful. They *belonged* together. They *had* to get married. Arianna 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, Arianna had a 'great idea.'^{*} Quietly, so as not to disturb anyone in the castle, Arianna 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. My mother *had* to be up to something.

"Arianna 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 and my stomach turned.

"There on the counter, Arianna saw the solution to all her problems."

Here it comes.

"A butcher knife!"

"Oh no!" I yelled, indignantly.

"Mom!" Casey protested.

^{*} I believe I've already covered what my mother considers a "great idea."

She ignored us, racing toward the story's crescendo. "Arianna 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 Arianna chopped three inches off her left foot."

"Mom, please," we begged.

"Howling in pain, Arianna forced herself to lower her left foot, which was now gushing blood. Next she raised her right foot onto the counter and—"

"Mom, no!" we shouted again.

"HACK! HACK!"

We screamed and Sammy began crying in the next room.

"She cut off three inches from her *right* foot! But Arianna was strong and didn't faint, even though she was in more agony than she had ever known. Painstakingly, 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 Sammy and held her gently. I can remember it vividly—my mother's silhouette in the doorway, my heart racing, Sammy cooing serenely in my mother's arms and a look of sheer horror covering Casey's face.

"Wh...wh...what happened to Arianna?" she stammered.

My mother stroked Sammy's hair and returned her to the crib. I was dumbfounded. Not from the

story. It was mild next to her ghastly history lessons. I simply couldn't reconcile the juxtaposition I was witnessing. Holding Sammy, 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?"

"I imagine it was quite excruciating."

I listened to the sounds of her putting my sleeping sister back to bed.

"Good night, *goils*."

"Mom?" I called.

"Hmm?"

"Did it turn out okay?" I was hesitant. "I mean, did they live happily ever after?"

"Of course. They just needed to build some ramps in the castle. Now good night and get some sleep." She began to close the door.

"Ramps for what?" Casey asked from underneath her covers.

"For Arianna's wheelchair."

"Oh," we said, our voices flat.

"Goodnight, *goils*."

"Goodnight, Mom."