

FIFTY PRINCESSES

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess. Her beauty made her anxious about many things. She wondered if she was beautiful because she was a princess, or if she was a princess because she was beautiful. She wondered whether her beauty came from inside her or outside her. She wondered if she had always been beautiful, and if she would always be beautiful. After she died, her body rotted away and was eaten by worms, and was not beautiful at all. However, this happened in a coffin six feet underground, and all anybody saw of her forever after were the hundreds of beautiful paintings of her.

Once upon a time, there was a mirror princess. Her silvery surface reflected everything around her perfectly. People came from far and wide and paid immense sums to see themselves in her. However, the fact that everyone only wanted to see themselves, and not her, made her resentful and unhappy. In protest, she locked herself in an extremely dark room, where nobody could see her, or anything in her, at all. Disoriented by the darkness, she tripped over and shattered into a thousand pieces.

Once upon a time, there was a needle princess. She was covered all over in tiny, vicious, barbed needles, and anyone or anything that came close to her was ripped to shreds. When she tried to speak, thousands of needles shot out of her mouth and eviscerated whoever she was speaking to. She even killed people accidentally by sneezing. So, she sat on her throne, high above everyone else, saying nothing, and daydreaming about a pincushion princess, whom she could speak to and confide in and touch and hold close.

Once upon a time, there was a drowned princess. Her lungs filled up with amniotic fluid in the womb, and she was born unable to breathe, desperately coughing up clear liquid. They put a crown on her head and tried their best to obey her. She was in desperate pain, but she couldn't get the words out to ask for help, so she died there and then.

Once upon a time, there was a rainbow princess. Her people forgot all about her existence until those moments after rainstorms when they would see her dazzling form arcing through the air. They watched, enraptured at this superior being far above them, and then returned to their work and forgot about her again.

Once upon a time, there was a mercury princess. Her form was terribly heavy and unstable, and it took constant effort to stay in one piece. One night, she had a horrible nightmare, and on waking she fell apart and soaked into the ground. She sank deeper and deeper, until she dissolved into the groundwater. Everybody living nearby drank her up and became ill and died.

Once upon a time, there was a boring princess. She desperately wanted to be interesting, but everything she did turned out to be boring. She tried to run away, but ended up just wandering around the streets until someone found her and brought her back. She tried to find an interesting hobby, but once she'd done it for a few weeks, it became boring. She ate boring things, and said boring things, and did boring things, and died a boring death.

Once upon a time, there was a woodlouse princess. She was a disgusting, squirming creature, with too many legs and a carapace at once too hard and too soft. Everyone who saw her was repulsed. Ashamed, she crawled away and hid under a rotting log. In the dark, narrow space, she nibbled gently at the soft black wood, and nobody knew that she was a princess, or even that she was there at all.

Once upon a time, there was a skin princess. Underneath most people's skin there is flesh and blood, but underneath hers there was just another layer of skin. Underneath that there was another layer, and so on. This disturbed her greatly. She wanted to believe that deep down, she had meat and bones and organs, just like everyone else, but was terrified that she was actually just skin all the way down, with nothing but a cavernous empty space inside. Some days she would stand in front of the mirror, tightly gripping a knife, ready to peel away layer after layer and find out once and for all, but ultimately she was too scared. She died without ever finding out what was inside her.

Once upon a time, there was a caged princess. She was born inside a big wicker cage, and she lived her whole life there. To her, this was the entire world, and she was princess of it, so she was very happy. She died peacefully, after a long and fulfilling life as ruler of her entire world.

Once upon a time, there was a bird princess. To her, the castle was horribly claustrophobic, and she wanted nothing more than to fly away, gliding on thermals and swooping through clouds. She tried to run away several times, but she was always caught and dragged back to the castle. Eventually, they had no choice but to clip her wings. No longer able to fly in real life, she retreated to her dreams, where she still could. One night, she had a dream so vivid, in which she flew so far away, that she never returned to her waking body at all.

Once upon a time, there was a fire princess. She was a passionate, joyful person, always laughing and creating mesmerising, wonderful shapes with her flickering form. She constantly needed to be fed firewood in order to stay alive, and she was always hungry. Her people cut down whole forests to feed her, because they loved her so much. However, the wood began to run low, and she became hungry. The hungrier she became, the angrier she became, and soon she flared up and devoured her throne, and the banners, and the carpets, and the furnishings, and the people, and the entire castle in fact. But after this, there was nothing left to eat and no one left to feed her, so soon she was nothing but smoke and ash.

Once upon a time, there was a snow princess. She had to be kept indoors in cold, dark places most of the year, and she had to travel far away every summer, to keep her from melting. The only times she was allowed outside were when it was freezing cold and snowing. At these times, the snow from the sky settled into her, making her bigger and bigger. One year, the winter was bitterly cold with terrible snowstorms. She grew so large that winter that when travelling the following summer, her carriage broke down under her weight, and to her people's horror, she melted away before their eyes. The sunlight prickled gently at her skin as she melted. It was a very pleasurable sensation.

Once upon a time, there was a dead princess. She didn't need to worry about looking presentable, because she was nothing but bones anyway, and that gave her more time to see the beauty in the world around her. She didn't need to worry about what to say, because she couldn't speak anyway, and that gave her more time to listen to the wisdom of the people around her. She found being dead so peaceful and enriching that she struggled to understand why anyone would want to be alive at all.

Once upon a time, there was a pencil princess. She used her point to write many, many stories, some happy, some funny, some tragic, about people and things both familiar and fantastical. Her people loved her stories, but the more she wrote, the more she wore away and the more she needed to be sharpened down so she could write again. Eventually, she had been sharpened down so far that she was nothing but a blunt little nub. Her people felt sorry for her, but she was happy, because now there was a little bit of her spread across all of these hundreds of stories, experiencing hundreds of times more things than she could have experienced if she had stayed whole.

Once upon a time, there was a rain princess. She cried constantly, and the more she cried, the more rain fell upon her kingdom. Her people tried to cheer her up, to make her stop crying, but the harder they tried the more awful she felt that they wanted her to be something she wasn't. The more awful she felt, the more she cried, and the more she cried, the more rain fell. The more rain fell, the more difficult the lives of her people became, as their crops failed and their homes were washed away. The more difficult their lives became, the more she cried at the tragedy of it all. One day, a travelling bard came and told her a story so delightful that she couldn't help but stop crying and laugh with joy. At once, the rain ceased and the sun shone through, and she evaporated away into the air.

Once upon a time, there was a sick princess. She was always ill, and her body was constantly aching and leaking pus. The royal doctors gave her medicine, but the medicine made her nauseous and unable to sleep. The doctors gave her more medicines to help with the nausea and insomnia, but these had further side effects. She resented that she, a royal, was always ill in one way or another, when many of her peasants were in perfect health. She offered all her riches in return for a cure, but soon succumbed to her illness and died.

Once upon a time, there was a transient princess. She lived millions of different lives: a farmer praying for a good harvest as his back aches from sowing seeds, then a soldier dying of a gut wound, then a woman drowning herself in the sea in a fit of passion, each for only a few seconds before she became someone else. In each incarnation she lived such a short life that she learned nothing, remembered nothing, created nothing, and changed nothing, but in total she did everything, felt everything, and experienced everything.

Once upon a time, there was a secret princess. She lived in a tiny hollow space inside the walls of the castle. Nobody knew she was there. She constantly eavesdropped, and through this learned every forbidden and secret thing that happened. She squirmed with pleasure at all the outrageous, salacious things she knew. She desperately wanted to share these secrets with somebody, but if

she did so, then they would cease to be secret, and she would cease to be secret as well. So she stayed secretly in the walls her whole life.

Once upon a time, there was a hair princess. She was luxurious and soft, her every strand like satin. She grew and grew, her locks spreading, centimetre by centimetre, throughout the castle and out into the kingdom. She got in the way and choked up the fields, but nobody could do anything about it because she was their princess, and who would dare take a pair of scissors to her?

Once upon a time, there was a mountain princess. She was so huge and so old and so permanent that most people couldn't conceive of her as a princess at all. Sometimes people would climb up her and plant a flag on her head as though to claim her, but in the time it took for her to blink, they would live out their entire lives and the flagpole would rust away to nothing. Once, she saw a terrible wildfire threatening to consume the city in the valley beneath her, and tried to divert a river to quench it. But by the time she succeeded, a million years had passed, and everybody was long dead.

Once upon a time, there was a loving princess. She loved everybody so, so, so much! Whether they were the most pious of saints or the most wretched of sinners, she adored them with her whole heart. She wanted to give her entire self to every single person in existence. However, her love pulled her so hard in so many different directions that she was torn to shreds.

Once upon a time, there was a dirty princess. Her skin was always mucky, and her bare feet were black with mud, and no matter how beautiful a gown she was dressed in, it was always torn to rags by the end of the day. Her people refused to recognise her, saying that they couldn't be ruled by a princess so squalid and filthy. This was unfortunate, because she had much wisdom to share with them that a conventional princess could not, such as that food that has fallen on the floor is usually still edible, or that clothes still keep you just as warm even if they're dirty. But her people didn't want wisdom, they wanted a clean and beautiful princess.

Once upon a time, there was a flower princess. Every spring, she emerged from the earth, and she was so captivatingly beautiful, her gentle curves and delicate aroma so calming, that everyone came together and sat around to admire her. Every summer she wilted and died, and her kingdom, without a ruler, descended into chaos and strife. But every spring she was reborn, and they came together again as though nothing had happened.

Once upon a time, there was an illusory princess. She did not exist. Every order that people thought she had given was just a misinterpreted message from somebody else in the castle. Everybody claiming to have seen or met her had simply met somebody else and mistaken them for her. Nobody ever realised the mistake, and she is still believed to exist to this day.

Once upon a time, there was a cosmonaut princess. She cared deeply for her people, but her place was up among the stars. She promised to be back soon, however once she was up in space, the beautiful, horrible void of space was so vast that she became lost and never found her way back home.

Once upon a time, there was a buried princess. She was sealed in stone deep beneath the earth. The people dug down to her, following the echoes of her

muffled cries through the rock. When they exhumed her and brought her to the surface, she was instantly blinded by the sunlight and deafened by the noise, and felt so exposed without the firm embrace of stone all around her that she begged to be buried again.

Once upon a time, there was a forgotten princess. She lived long, long ago, and she accomplished many things, and struggled, and fought for what she believed in, and triumphed, and lost, and died. However, there aren't even memories of her left now. All that remain are stories, and these stories often contradict one another. No one even knows what her name was any more.

Once upon a time, there was a clockwork princess. Her gears and springs operated together perfectly, flawlessly executing all of her duties. However, she had no agency over what her mechanisms caused her to do. Everything had been preordained from the day she was born. One day, a tiny cog in her elbow came loose, and she began to malfunction. She felt a pulse of excitement, realising that for the first time in her life, she did not know what she was going to do next. Was this free will, she wondered? But then, one gear after another slipped out of place, and she soon collapsed into a pile of inanimate clockwork on the floor.

Once upon a time, there was a borderline princess. She was never quite one thing and never quite another, always lingering in doorways, impossible to pin down. The wealthy in her kingdom hated her, for thanks to her they were always on the brink of losing everything. But the impoverished loved her, for thanks to her any moment they might gain everything they needed.

Once upon a time, there was a personal princess. Her kingdom was only a single room, and her people were only a single girl. But to that one girl she was her personal princess, and that was all that mattered.

Once upon a time, there was a monstrous princess. She did her best to withhold from eating human flesh, and she hid her monstrous form behind fine gowns and veils and jewellery, but nonetheless her people spread rumours about her that were even crueler and more awful than the reality. Hearing this, she wept for ten days, then gave in and embraced her monstrous nature, hunting down and devouring every last one of her people.

Once upon a time, there was a cardboard princess. When she was on parade, her people watched and wondered what unknowable virtue she held in her heart that set her apart from them. The rulers of neighbouring kingdoms paid advisors and spies to try to find out what was going on behind her placid smile. But there was nothing inside her, she was as depthless as a sheet of cardboard.

Once upon a time, there was a manifold princess. She was a different person to everyone who met her. To one person she might be a friend, to another a tyrant, to another a pitiful wretch. These differences caused some of her people to turn against one another, each believing their perception to be her true nature. Others embraced her inconsistency, claiming that only by sharing all their manifold experiences of her could they come to understand who the princess truly was. Some wondered who she was to herself, but nobody knew the answer to that but her.

Once upon a time, there was a glacier princess. Everything she did, she did slowly and deliberately. She was seen by her people as constant and unchanging, but this was untrue. In fact, she was continually accreting out of compacted snowfall at her head, and continually crumbling away at her feet. Over the span of a few centuries, no part of her was the same and she had changed entirely into somebody else.

Once upon a time, there was a tragic princess. She was orphaned as a child, her every love was unrequited, and everything she tried to do only made things worse. The most tragic thing of all, however, was that there was no purpose or meaning to any of it. She lived a tragic life and died a tragic death for no reason at all.

Once upon a time, there was a broken princess. She was always injured in one way or another. As soon as her broken arm healed, she would get in an accident and break her leg, instead. Sometimes her injuries were worse, and sometimes they were better, but they were never good enough to do the things she loved. The pain of having hope of getting to some day ride a horse, then losing it at her next injury, was much more painful than any bruise or broken bone could be. So, she climbed to the top of the tallest tower in the castle and threw herself down the stairs, tumbling all the way to the bottom. Every single bone in her body was splintered and mangled beyond recognition, with no hope of ever healing, so finally she could be at peace.

Once upon a time, there was a parasitic princess. She sat in her throne, reaching out little tendrils into the kingdom around her and sucking away all of the wealth, the food, and the love from the surrounding land. Eventually, her people could tolerate this no longer, and they rebelled and executed her. But by this point she had been there so long that her tendrils were the only thing holding the kingdom together. Without her, everything collapsed into rubble.

Once upon a time, there was a virtual princess. She was nothing but a sequence of ones and zeros, but her kingdom was real, her people were real, and their love for her was real, and that makes her more real than you or me!

Once upon a time, there was an incomprehensible princess. Everything she said came out not as words or symbols, but as flashes of coloured light or squeaks or whistles. Her people, wanting to understand and obey her as best they could, elected interpreters to try to make sense of her communications. These interpreters always got it wrong. When she said to go to war, they instead thought she said to lower taxes, and so on. However, the wrong interpretations always turned out to be the best thing to do, and she gained a reputation as a wise and compassionate leader.

Once upon a time, there was a distributed princess. Every one of her people contained a little bit of her, whether this was a certain mannerism, or a fond memory, or a single eyelash. Because of this, her people always treated one another with kindness and reverence, because in doing so they were also showing kindness and reverence to their princess.

Once upon a time, there was a bloody princess. She started wars with each of the neighbouring kingdoms, slaughtering their citizens and plundering their wealth. Taking pleasure in the thrill of battle, she conquered more and more,

until eventually there was no one left to conquer. Thirsty for more, she turned her people against one another, and they fought among themselves until she was the last person standing. In the cold silence that followed, she simply scabbed over and dried up.

Once upon a time, there was an abyss princess. Her people tried their very best to avoid looking at or thinking about her, but she was always there beside them. One by one, they accidentally slipped and fell into her, being immediately swallowed up. Finally, her few remaining people covered her up with a big sheet of canvas and agreed to never think about her again.

Once upon a time, there was a pincushion princess. Everyone loved her because she was so soft and could tolerate anything. But to her, the outside world was all muffled and distant, and she couldn't even feel anything that happened at her surface. She longed for a needle princess who could penetrate right to her heart and make her feel something for once.

Once upon a time, there was a star princess. She was very far away, and it took a long time for light from her to reach her kingdom, or for light from her kingdom to reach her. Once, she tried to say something to her people, but it came out as a solar flare that almost killed everyone. She learned to just watch from a distance.

Once upon a time, there was a nomadic princess. Her kingdom, and all of her people with it, were always travelling from place to place. She loved and appreciated every single place her kingdom passed through, and kept souvenirs from them all. Eventually, her castle was so weighed down with souvenirs that her people could no longer carry it, and suddenly she was a nomad no longer.

Once upon a time, there was a spider princess. Nobody trusted her, so she had to control her kingdom by pulling strings in the background. However, she wanted to be loved openly like other princesses were, so she caught a beautiful butterfly in her web and sewed its dazzling iridescent wings onto her body. She went into her kingdom, introducing herself as the butterfly princess, their new ruler. But her deception was soon revealed when it became obvious that she couldn't fly, and her people only trusted her even less after that.

Once upon a time, there was a virtuous princess. Her people loved and respected her for her good morals. However, they soon realised that the more moral quandries she was placed in, the more likely it became that she would fall short of their image of her, and that would be simply unbearable. So, whenever difficult decisions needed to be made, they simply dealt with them as best they could, never troubling her. Her kingdom was a place of great misery and confusion as a result.

Once upon a time, there was a stone princess. Her people tunneled into her and carved her into little blocks to build their houses. They sometimes felt guilty about doing this, but she didn't mind, for they would soon die and fossilise and become a part of her. Besides, they were so tiny and transient that to her they were like froth on the surface of the ocean.

Once upon a time, there was a wretched princess. She had no kingdom, no castle, no people, and, in fact, could hardly be considered a princess at all. To escape her wretched life, she fantasised about the lives of other princesses,

happy and sad, wondrous and mundane, learning what she could from each. However, when she opened her eyes, her wretched life was always as stark and vivid as before.