

The Little Princess

“Ha! Joker!” The queen lowered her voice and whispered: “If you ever have them, fold them up, store them away, and forget.”

By now, the little princess was too confused to stay for another minute.

“Goodbye, Your Highness. I hope you solve your quandary someday.”

“I probably won’t,” the queen sighed. “It’s highly unlikely.”

As she flew away from the planet, the little princess thought, “If I were a queen, I could do wonderful things...”

She told me about it later, and all I could think of was how much easier it is to dream you’re a queen than to see that you’re a princess.

XIV

The next planet was even bigger. It was inhabited by seagulls. “That’s a lot of seagulls for one planet,” said the little princess. But she couldn’t hear her own voice at all over the seagulls’ roaring screams.

She began walking through the cloud of birds. Wherever she stepped, the birds would give way, and she hiked among them as if traveling through water in an air bubble. She reached a rocky hillside and started climbing, slowly ascending above the birds. The hill ended in a tall cliff, which extended out over the sea. She stood at the edge, away from all the noise, and looked down at the swarming gulls. It was, she thought, like looking at the sky from above.

She wasn’t alone. A silent seagull was perched beside her.

“Good morning,” said the little princess. She had never found a better way to start a conversation. The seagull kept staring into the distance.

"Morning. I don't care," the seagull said and ruffled her feathers.

The princess was puzzled at the sight of this one, lonely bird, and tried to keep the conversation going.

"Excuse me for asking, but you seem to be the only seagull so high up on the cliff. Why aren't you down there, with your brothers and sisters?"

"They are having fun, aren't they?" said the seagull bitterly. "Screaming their lungs out. Chasing one another. Laying eggs. Eggs! Do I wish I could lay eggs? Maybe. It doesn't matter. Oh, look at them. Just look at them. So full of themselves. So loud."

"So... you'd rather stay here?"

"Whatever. I don't care. If they wanted to be with me, they'd come up here, right? But I don't see them flocking up here," said the seagull, and shrugged. "If I wanted to know where someone was, I would go to where they were."

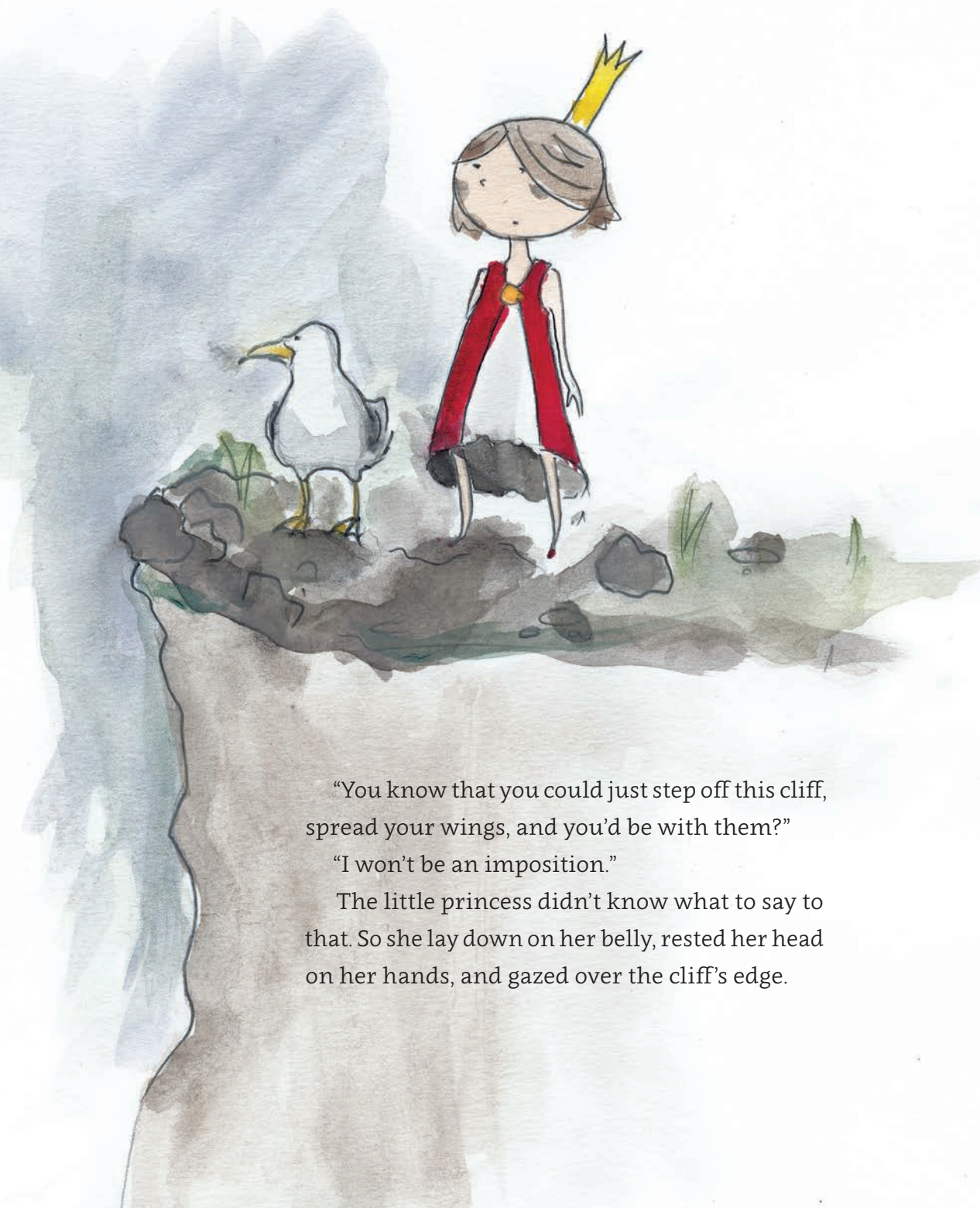
"Do they know you're here, though?"

"Well, no, of course not. No seagull ever comes up this high. See, the air up here is really not good for us. It makes us feel dizzy and nauseous. And there's no food. We eat fish, you know."

"But... then why are you... aren't you going to starve?"

"Don't blame me! I didn't put myself in this situation. No one cares these days. That's the main problem."

The little princess herself felt dizzy, and perhaps a little bit nauseous.



"You know that you could just step off this cliff, spread your wings, and you'd be with them?"

"I won't be an imposition."

The little princess didn't know what to say to that. So she lay down on her belly, rested her head on her hands, and gazed over the cliff's edge.

Below them, the seagulls were building nests in hollowed rocks, quarrelling, and diving into the water to catch fish. She listened to their distant cries. The seagull stared down, too, with desperate longing in her eyes.

It was time to leave.

"I'll be going."

"Do what you have to do," replied the seagull, looking the other way.

The little princess embraced the seagull, carefully. At first tense, she softened and let the princess hold her. A single tear fell from her eye and landed on the princess's cheek.

"That wasn't necessary," said the seagull in a muted voice, stiffening again as the princess released her from the hug. "I'm doing just fine. None of this matters to me."

"Of course," said the princess. "Goodbye."

XV

The next planet looked like a tiny meadow. It was covered with the smoothest grass, peppered with poppies and cornflowers.

The little princess stretched out on the grass, enjoying the sun and the warm breeze.

"This must be the nicest planet in the universe," she said. "The only thing missing is some sort of tree, perhaps, to give shade when one grows weary of the sun."

She felt the ground stir under her hand. "A mole," she thought. But it wasn't a mole. A sprout shot out of the soil so quickly that she hardly managed to draw back her hand. She leaped up and watched in astonishment as the sprout became a sapling and, in just a few moments, turned into a birch tree: slender, with white bark covered in black notches, and a silvery-green mass of leaves that looked like a cloud of rain suspended by magic in mid-air.



The little princess was at a loss for words, so she just said: "Whooooa!"

"What, don't you like it?" asked a low, sweet voice. It didn't come from anywhere in particular, though the ground seemed to vibrate as it spoke.

The little princess looked around for where the voice was coming from.

"No, it's... it's lovely. But... where are you?"

"Hard to say where, exactly," murmured the voice gently, "since I'm actually the planet."

"How extraordinary! I've never talked to a planet before. I didn't think it was possible."

She looked at the birch tree and added: "Thank you so much for this tree, dear planet. But... I didn't really mean to ask for it, you know?"

"But you did think it would be nice. Didn't you?"

"Yes, yes, I did. I did. But if I'd known you would immediately fulfil my wish, I'd have been more careful with my words. I think a tree might be useful here... but what if I'd wished for something that might be bad for you? Like, say, a swarm of potato beetles?"

The planet's voice was warm as it asked: "Do you like potato beetles?"

The princess laughed.

"Frankly, I have no idea, I've never come across them. I'd like to meet one before I make up my mind, wouldn't you?"

The air in front of her face swirled, and a large potato beetle fell onto the grass. It glanced around without much interest and began to chew the nearest blade of grass. In just a few seconds, it had eaten a patch as big as the little princess's footprint.

"Why did you do that?" the little princess exclaimed. "It's going to eat everything! You'll be bare in less than a day!"

"But how would you have known whether you like potato beetles if I hadn't given you one?" the planet asked.

The beetle was chomping through the grass, revealing patches of dry soil.

"Who cares, really?! Beetle, stop, please!" she shouted to the insect, to no effect. "Oh, I wish I'd said something else. Anything! A rabid dog would be better than this..."

"A rabid dog," repeated the planet sweetly.

A gust of wind swirled in front of the little princess's eyes. She heard a bark, and a dog the size of a big rat popped out of the swirl, falling onto the ground. It leaped up immediately, darting around the entire planet as fast as lightning. It stopped abruptly to dig a hole. Dirt was flying in all directions, and soon the dog had disappeared underground.

The princess shook her head. "Now you're really going to be destroyed!" she said. "Is that dog really rabid?"

"I hope so," the planet said in a steady, gentle voice, as if it

wasn't being devoured and dug through at that very moment. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Can you please stop doing what you think I want? Don't you ever think about yourself?"

"Do you want me to think about myself?" The planet sounded surprised.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do!"

A very long stretch of silence followed. The only discernible sound came from the potato beetle's loud, methodical chewing and the dog's occasional underground growls. Then, a strange murmur rose from the ground into the air, shaking the planet slightly. It took the princess a moment to realize that the planet was, in fact, crying.

"Why, what is it?" asked the princess.

"I can't," sobbed the planet. "I'm so, so sorry, but I can't. I'm not even sure what I'm supposed to think about when I'm thinking about myself!"

And the planet let out an earthy sort of howl.

The little princess felt guilty for upsetting her.

"Oh, planet, no, don't cry... Let's figure it out together. You could start... you could start with thinking about your beautiful grass... your poppies... the breeze...?"

The planet kept crying, shaking the little princess with every ground-heaving sob.

"But these poppies are here only because of my previous visitor. He liked meadows, so I became one. You have no idea

how hard it was—I didn't even know what a proper meadow looked like... I had to improvise... and then, he didn't even like it. Apparently, some things called 'daisies' were missing... I just can't stop trying to give everyone what they want."

"That must be hard."

"That's not even the worst part."

"What's the worst part?"

"I'm afraid that if I were to think about myself, and I couldn't think of anything... I'd just disappear."

The little princess walked a few steps away from both the potato beetle and the digging dog. She sat on the ground and patted the supple grass. She said gently: "Hey, little planet. If there's one thing I'm sure of, it's that things have a habit of continuing to exist no matter what you think."

"Are you sure?"

"I am."

"So how do I figure out who I am?"

"I don't know. That seems like a big project. Let's start with something smaller. Tell me your name. That's all we need, for now. Tell me your name, little planet."

The planet slowly stopped sobbing. It was quiet for a long time. The little princess

waited patiently. And then, finally, she heard a strangely powerful, deep, thrumming voice, very different to the one she'd heard before.

The planet was telling the little princess her name.

Something changed in the air. The little princess didn't know what it was exactly, but the meadow didn't feel so agreeable anymore. It looked... wild.

"Thank you," the planet said, firmly, and the little princess knew it was time to move on.

XVI

After a few disappointing visits to empty planets, circling their orbits in solitary silence, the little princess landed on one that seemed to have an active volcano: a black hill in the distance, the summit covered with smoke. She thought of walking closer and taking a look, but then she saw a house.

It was a sturdy little home made of red brick, surrounded by a painted fence and a perfectly trimmed hedge. She released the latch on the gate and walked up to the house. Everything felt clean and well-organized. Well, almost everything: the left side of the roof had a huge, gaping hole in it.

A voice from deep inside the house called: "Come on in!" The princess turned the doorknob and went inside. She found herself in a large, clean kitchen. On the stove, several pot lids were jumping up and down from the steam. Behind the table, a woman was peeling garlic.

"Sit down, dear," she said. "Dinner's almost ready."

"Oh, I'm not hungry, thank you."

"Nonsense. It's roast pork with stuffed figs and potatoes. Can you pass me the small knife? It's in the drawer on the left. No, not that one. The one with the brown handle. Yes, that one. Put the other one in the sink. Things shouldn't just lie on the counter for no good reason."

The little princess passed her the small knife and put the other one in the sink.

"Now, see—some people prefer to crush garlic, but that's taking the easy way out," said the woman, encouraging the little princess to look closer. "You should chop it into tiny pieces, like this. Now pass me the potatoes. We have to cut them into identical one-inch cubes, or we can't predict the cooking time down to the second."

"Do we really want to predict it?"

The woman stopped chopping and looked at her. "Of course we do. Otherwise the cooking process gets completely out of control. And once you lose control, it's very, very hard to get it back."

Just as the little princess was putting the potatoes on the table, placing them at a proper distance from a pile of neatly folded dish towels, she heard a terrible roar outside. She looked through the window. There was a black dragon in the yard, so black he seemed to be cut from the starless night sky. The dragon growled, smoke curling from his nostrils.

Apparently, the hill in the distance was not a volcano. It was a dark, smoke-breathing beast.

The dragon circled the yard, crushing the hedge. He looked around absentmindedly before taking a bite out of the fence. He tried to chew it, but must have found it disappointing, because he spat it out into a patch of geraniums.

The princess was terrified. As soon as her voice returned, she shouted: "There's a dragon outside! A fence-eating dragon. We need to get out of here!"

"Don't be silly," said the woman. "Focus on the potatoes."

"How am I supposed to focus on the potatoes? There's... there's a dragon!"

"Less screaming and more chopping, please. Here's a tape measure," said the woman. She took the tape measure from another drawer and handed it to the princess. "One inch. No more, no less. And while you're doing that, I'll put the pork in the oven."

Just as she was reaching for the roasting dish, there was a loud crunching sound from behind the oven. The dragon had taken a big bite out of the wall. The oven toppled forward, and the dragon pushed his gigantic nostrils through the hole in the wall, breathing heavily as he pumped black smoke into the room.

The woman looked at her wrecked oven.

"Come to think of it," said the woman, "roast pork is heavy on the stomach. Perhaps we should stick to figs and potatoes."

The little princess couldn't believe it. She began running around the room, waving a wet dish towel in the air, trying to get rid of the suffocating smoke.



"This is madness!" she cried.

"Madness is uneven potatoes," the woman said weakly, pearls of sweat glistening on her forehead.

The dragon put one of his massive claws through the wall, blindly trying to grab at something, and the little princess suddenly had an idea. She seized the pork loin and ran outside. She yelled: "Hey, dragon! Over here!" As soon as she had the beast's attention, she threw the pork loin as far as she could. She wasn't particularly strong, but it was a decent throw. The dragon, smelling the meat, yanked his paw out of the house and followed the scent. The little princess ran back into the house, shut the door, and urged the woman: "We need to leave. Now."

But the woman just smoothed her apron.

"Thank you, but I'll deal with this little mishap in my own way."



"How?"

"By rearranging the cupboards, of course", replied the woman. "And lining them with decorative paper. See, once you admit you've lost control, you'll never get it back."

"Maybe you never had it in the first place," said the princess. "Did you ever think about that?"

"Now, that's just silly. More of that kind of talk and you'll start seeing some very dark Things. Don't step on the grass on your way out, please. It took me forever to get that lawn just right."

The little princess fixed her crown, which had fallen over one ear, and got ready to leave. She glanced through the door, at the front garden savaged by the dragon. Then she turned to the woman and said: "At least tell me you understand that you're in mortal danger."

The woman looked at her, her face stained with soot.

"We all are," she shrugged. "And unlike you, at least I'll have a proper dinner."

After telling me this story one evening on our beach, the little princess said: "I really worry about that woman. It's much harder to avoid the dragon when you're pretending not to see it."

"True," I said. "But then once you see the dragon, you can't keep cooking."

"That's kind of what she said," replied the princess. "But she could cook a much better dinner somewhere else."

"Do you always see danger? Don't you sometimes just want to close your eyes?"

She changed the subject, of course.

"What's the country you come from called?"

"America. It's very far away."

"Could you teach me how to fly a plane?"

I thought it was probably pointless. After five days of non-stop work, I didn't seem to be any closer to fixing the plane. I was running out of food, fresh water, and time. But I just said: "Of course. Let's climb in."

XVII

Next, the little princess spotted an interesting-looking planet. It sparkled and flashed, like a disco ball.

It was inhabited by a young woman. Her dress was draped over one shoulder, and her hair was so long it reached to her calves. All around her, perched on tripods of different heights, there were flashing cameras. She put her leg forward, pouted, and waited for a flash. Next, she ruffled her hair, smiled, and waited for another camera flash.

But between the flashes, the little princess noticed, her face would contort, as if in pain. She asked her if she needed help, but the woman just answered: "Stay where you are. You'll get in the frame."

The little princess stayed where she was. But being who she was, she couldn't stay silent for long. "Do you mind telling me what you're doing?"

"I'm a model," said the woman.

"What does that mean?"

"It's a very important job and I'm not sure I have time for chit-chat."