

The Vision of Prince Frederick

By Nick Hayden

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful princess. This story is about her. You might think the story is about the prince. It is not about the prince. It is about the princess. You must understand this. If you do not, you will find the story hard to enjoy, because you might think the prince a fool.

The reason this story is about the princess and not the prince is because the prince had a vision. He was not old enough to like women at the time of his vision. He was younger even than a boy who dislikes girls. He was at that early age where boy and girl know there is some difference between them, but they do not notice it, or, if they do notice it, they do not care.

His father the king owned a large forest, which he used for hunting. The boy was not old enough to hunt. The boy *was* old enough to walk, so he was old enough to enjoy exploring the forest. One day he sat by the creek and watched the shallow water ripple over the stones. A girl sat down beside him. He did not know the girl, but it was a nice spot by the creek he had chosen, so he figured she wanted to share it.

“Would you like to play?” she asked him.

“Yes, I think I would.”

“What would you like to play?”

The boy prince considered. “I will be a knight, and you will be a dragon.”

But the girl screwed her face in disgust. “I do not want to be a dragon.”

“You won’t really be a dragon,” the boy answered. “You will just pretend to be a dragon.”

The girl shook her head. “I will not play that game.”

The boy did not press her, for he wanted to play *something*. He did not

understand why she would not be a dragon. “What if I am the dragon and you are the knight?” he asked.

“I think we should play family. I will be the mother, and you will be married to me.”

“I do not want to be married,” the boy said in his polite voice.

“You won’t really be married,” the girl said. “You will just pretend to be married.”

The boy could find nothing wrong with this, so he agreed to play with her. They spent the day in their small cottage. It moved with them as they ran from one part of the forest to another. One of their children – they had 15 – caught a dreadful illness and died. The boy buried the child (a mushroom). Another child became a famous knight, and they cheered at his victorious return home. A third child, a favorite daughter, fell in love with a peasant, and the boy and girl were wracked with the terrible impropriety of the situation.

But worst of all, the girl grew weaker and weaker as the day proceeded. She said a wife must get old. It is the way the world works, she said. For a long time the boy thought she was good at pretending. But when evening came, and they said goodbye, she lay still on the ground, imitating febleness.

“Can we play again tomorrow?” the boy asked.

“I would like that,” the girl answered. “Frederick?”

“Yes?” He wasn’t sure if he should add, “My dear.” He didn’t because he thought the game was over.

“Are you my friend?”

“Yes. I really enjoyed today. Meet at the creek tomorrow.”

“If I don’t come, will you wait for me?”

“I suppose I’ll have to. I can’t play by myself.”

“Kiss me good night, Frederick.”

“The game’s over, Evelyn. I have to go.”

“Just this one thing, please.”

He kissed her on her forehead and ran home. When he returned the next day, he waited for her. She did not come. For a week he waited. She did not come. He waited for an hour every day for a month. When she did not come, he forgot about her for many years.

When he was sixteen, he began entering the tournaments of the kingdom. There were many kinds of tournaments: jousting, fencing, wrestling, archery, hunting, tree climbing, tree felling, horse racing, foot racing, and whittling. He was always ranked high, for he had become strong and wise. He was not yet as strong and wise as he would be, but he was sixteen and thought that he was.

Now, many young ladies eyed him from afar, for it is the lot of princes to be handsome as well as strong and wise. He, too, eyed the ladies from afar. Sometimes, he eyed them much closer. His father the king was not always an observant man, but he noticed his son’s tendencies. He had rarely spoken with his son on personal matters, for he held his trusted advisors in great esteem, and they were to train the boy. However, the king felt he must discuss the issue with his son.

“Son, I must discuss an issue with you.”

The prince tried to put his father off by many methods, and the father was nearly put off, but he steeled himself. “Son, someday soon you will have to choose a wife.”

“How many may I choose, father?”

The father took a long time to realize this was a joke and so spent five

minutes sputtering words even he did not understand. His son laughed at him. This made him angry. “Son, your mother was the one I loved. When she died, I lost myself. This world is not as ... I miss her, and I will always miss her until the day I am reunited with her. The world is shattered; my body groans for restoration. You have heard what the priests say. When two are married, they become one. This is truth. You must not choose unwisely, or you will graft something hateful to your very soul. Son, I do not know how to explain what I mean – why are the important things of life only understood in hindsight? You must walk by obedience until you understand. Let me choose a dozen virtuous ladies of fine upbringing to bring before you.”

“Father, you are old. Do you have any idea what a young man desires in a woman?”

“I have an idea. That is why you must not choose. I am your king and father. Will you obey me?”

The prince smiled smugly. “Why not? It might be fun.”

Prince Frederick spent an afternoon and evening with each of the dozen ladies his father had chosen. He could not see marrying the first, for she snorted when she laughed. The second was much too timid. The third was wider than he, which he could not allow. The fourth argued with him and would not concede his points. The fifth did not allow him to touch her, even to hold her hand. The sixth clung to him until he thought he would yell at her (and he did). The seventh talked too much of God. The eighth was agreeable in every way, so much so that she seemed perfectly ordinary; she held no romantic interest for him. The ninth did not get his jokes. The tenth wore ragged clothes and seemed ashamed by the prince’s extravagance. The eleventh looked rather like a man.

By the twelfth, the prince looked forward to being done with his father's little game. He met the carriage bearing her to the castle and helped her out, as his father had demanded. She was a thin, frail young woman. She did not want to go horseback riding (as he had hoped to do). Instead, they played chess in a room filled with windows and light. She was a good player, which he enjoyed, but the more they played, sometimes in silence, sometimes with snatches of humorous conversation, the more he looked at her.

"Have we met before?" he asked.

She returned his gaze with timid, shining eyes. "I see that you find something in me you like."

Her statement frustrated him. When he spoke, it was with a little anger. "I only thought I recognized you from some memory."

"Is it a good memory, Prince Frederick?"

He didn't know. He continued to play. After the game and after dinner, they danced in the ballroom with the nobles who had been invited. She was graceful in his arms, full of energy, but after a song or two the fair lady, breathless, needed to sit and recover.

"I am sorry, good prince," she said, her hand to her chest. "I am not completely well."

The prince sat up straight, struck by a memory he had forgotten, a memory that appeared to him in haunting beauty. A girl lay by a creek in the failing light. "If I don't come, will you wait for me?"

"Prince, what is it?"

"Have you ever played beside the creek with a boy in the king's forest?"

"No." She looked at him with deep interest. "You have found the memory."

The prince didn't know what to say. Words were always on the tip of his tongue in the presence of women, but now he was flustered. "I apologize, my lady. You remind me strongly of her, somehow."

"Her?" Her eyes twinkled with mischievous delight. "You have found a lost love, my prince?"

"No, it's only a forgotten memory. Maybe a dream."

"Well, I am happy for you. Look for her. Not everyone is given a dream of the one they will love."

The prince was again speechless, but the twelfth lady dragged him to the floor and they danced as long as she was able.

It was late that night when the twelfth lady left the castle. She parted from the prince with a smile. It drove him frantic as she lingered outside the carriage that would take her home. "Please, my lady, turn away! I cannot bear the smile on your lips!"

The young lady was perturbed for a moment, but she had spent many days sick in bed, with the observation of people her only distraction. She knew how men and women worked deep within. "Do not think I am hiding something. I know less than you do," she said. "I do not know this girl you have recalled. I do not know if it is only a passing emotion or a groaning of your soul. I smile, Prince Frederick, because I see that you have found something you did not know you had lost. Hold on to it. The air of this world is filled with dreams, but somehow we cannot hold onto them. Few, precious few, clutch them as they should. For some dreams, one must sleep. For others, one must wake up."

She kissed him gently then, hiding the tears in her eyes. He watched her carriage draw away. It was not until later he recognized that she could have loved him. He, too, could have loved her. They could have been happy. And

it was not until much later, near the end of his life, that he realized he had decided on those stairs that he did not want to be happy. He wanted something more than mere happiness.

That night, he returned to the creek in the king's forest where he had last seen the girl of his memory. The place was changed, but he recognized it, as if it were a friend he had not seen in many years. He did not know why he was there, but he could not sleep and he could not bring himself to leave.

It was a long night. At times he imagined he could will the girl to appear before him, that if he closed his eyes and wished and prayed, that if he had faith and did not doubt, he would open his eyes and find her before him. At others times the dark forest fell away in a confusion of doubt. He asked himself if the memory was real, if he had ever met such a girl. He thought himself mad, or at least pitiable, for clinging to such a gauze of hope. The shadowy trees grew into phantoms as his mind spiraled with these thoughts, until he wondered where he was and why.

Light came slowly in the morning, creeping in among the texture of bark and grass and intertwined leaves. The whisper of the creek, ghostly in the dark, turned to pastoral melody, singing alongside the birds. Still the prince waited, not really expecting for the girl to appear, but hoping against hope. The sun rose and began to fall. The prince had eaten nothing, and he refused to drink the water that invited him. When evening came and the stars blossomed, he returned to the castle, sad, but not without hope. The long battle of doubt and memory and faith had strengthened him. He would wait for the girl, or he would find her, or he would die unmarried.

Years passed. Five, to be exact, but they seemed as twenty to the prince as he rode out in search of his bride; they seemed to have passed more rapidly than an hour, too, when he thought upon all the places he had yet to

look.

His father died. The grief of that loss hollowed him; he felt like a ghost among the living, a stone of flesh whom none could warm. He spent a year in mourning, in the great, lightless monastery where worshippers and sinners took refuge from the world. How dear his father had become to him during his last years, the prince could not explain, but he felt it, and the feeling was such that none could share it.

The love of his father and the love of the woman he would marry were often confused in his head, especially at night, when he prayed for dreamless sleep. His nightmares were despair and loss given form, as indescribable as the feelings themselves.

His only company was a blind singer and a deaf painter. They had a strange way of going about their trades. The painter, using his hands, told his blind friend to sing a song. Then, watching his friend intently for some time as he sang, the painter would begin to paint, as if inspired by the song he could not hear. Likewise, when the singer desired a new melody, he asked his deaf friend to paint him a picture. Then, with blind hands moving over the portrait, the singer would quickly compose a melody.

One day, they offered to perform their works on the prince's behalf. He agreed. At their request, he spoke for the painter so he could watch his lips and allowed his face and hands to be felt by the singer. These are the words the singer composed:

*Wait for me, if you will wait.
Love me, dear, if you will love.
I am near, but I am far.
Pretend I'm at your side.
Pretend you're mine, and I'm yours.
Now and not yet,*

*Now and not yet.
If Time were not cruel,
It would be kind.
If love did not hurt,
It would be fine.
But wait for me, if you will wait.
Love me, dear, though I am late.
I am near, but not so far.
Pretend I'm at your side,
And I'll pretend you're at mine.*

The portrait the painter produced was of a lady the same age as the prince. He recognized her with tears. “My friends, my dearest friends!” he proclaimed. “You have given me a great gift this day!”

That gift was hope, a beacon of light in the dark groping of his soul.

When he left the monastery, the kingdom had been forfeit to the next in line, his cousin. He did not care.

More years passed. Three times now he had been given signs. First, by the appearance of the girl when he was a boy. Second, when the twelfth eligible lady pointed him in the direction of that memory. Third, when the painter and singer conjured the idea of her from his mind. He was given no more. He longed to ride about the world, to search for her, but he knew she was hidden somewhere he could not find her; and he knew, with a confidence that wavered but never cracked, that he must wait. To wait, and nothing else, was his duty.

He built a cottage beside the creek where he had first met her, and there he became an old man. Though the king's forest was off-limits except to guests of the royal family, many snuck in to see the one-time prince.

“Why do you wait here?” they asked him. “Is this story we hear true, that you are waiting for a woman?”

The prince nodded, but remained silent.

“Where is this woman? Describe her to us! Where has she gone that you wait for her here?”

The prince could not describe her. She was color and brush strokes in his mind, without the substance of a real thing.

“If you love her, find her! Take her! Don’t wait here like a dullard!” they cried, some agitated by his seeming indifference, and others amused.

“She cannot be found,” the prince said. “It is not a thing that man can bring about – love. When she is within my grasp, I will seize her.” His body trembled with feeling. “I will seize her and never let go, whether she burns with fire or ice, or tries to drift away in wind and fog. How slippery are the things we desire, unless our grip is firm!”

“She will be old when she comes. Go now, find a pretty young lass, and be merry!”

The prince shook his head. “I would like to be merry, but it would be a shallow pleasure to wed another. I know you think me mad. Perhaps I am. But I will be mad for the chance to know this woman.”

His visitors laughed secretly at him, for he spoke like a youth first in love. “No woman is equal to his words,” they thought.

Whenever one said such a thing, the prince looked at him with shining eyes. His lips formed words as if it were the kiss he long awaited. “I know.”

After a while even the people seemed to forget him. They visited less and less, so he was alone in his last days, hardly able to walk. He woke each morning in pain. With shuffling steps he went about his little cottage. He sat on a chair and looked out the window at the overgrown forest until the light dimmed and disappeared. He slept, having eaten little and sipping only a cup of water.

One day he could not rise from bed. He could see a square of sky and branches out the window. A shadow seemed to pass by. There was a knock at the door. Frederick could not speak. The words, "Come in," came out as barely a whisper. He heard the knock again. In a sense of panic, he tried to rise, but his body would not respond. He breathed heavily with the effort. The knock came a third time. Frederick closed his eyes against it like a man blocking an attack. He waited for another knock. It did not come.

He relaxed in defeat. Out the window, he saw only the corner of sky covered in branches. He stared at it, hoping that she might look in. He felt warmth on his hand. He turned and looked. A young lady, wide-eyed, stood over him.

"Oh!" she said, pulling her hands away. "I—I heard there was a prince in these woods."

"Yes," he whispered, barely audible. He tried to study her face, but his eyes would not focus. "Are you--?" He could say no more.

"I heard the tales. I wanted to see you. I wanted to see if you really waited for a vision, a remembrance, something you barely knew."

Frederick closed his eyes. He wanted to sleep. "Are you—?" he tried to say again. He could not.

"I wanted to come to see if the tales were true, because I wanted you to know something. You cannot have a dream. A real dream never dies. But you—can I help you? Do you need something?"

Frederick feebly shook his head.

He opened his eyes with effort and looked at the young woman. She held his hand. "But pretend I was her. Can you do that?"

Frederick could only see the blurred strokes of the painting now behind his heavy eyelids. He felt her kiss his forehead.

“And pretend you are not old. Pretend you are not dying. Pretend that you are a young man. Pretend that you are a man who never ages, a man who lives forever.”

But he shook his head just a little, side to side. He would not wait forever. He had thought he could, but she would never come. This world did not hold her. If she had ever been, she had left the world behind that night at the creek, as she lay sick and feeble.

“Pretend the world has passed away. Pretend all the pain is over. Pretend that I am yours and you are mine.”

Frederick opened his eyes. He lay on the bank of the creek. She sat beside him, smiling at him.

“Are you?” he asked.

“It was not a dream, and it was not pretend,” she said. “Some dreams are true although the world is false. The world is not shattered here.”

She caused him to stand, and he walked with her into the forest, where he remained forever.

THE END