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The Best Things in Life · *Lenora Champagne*

(FAIRY TALES FOR ADULTS)

I.

Once upon a time there were two children, a brother and a sister. They were advanced for their ages and agreed to leave childhood behind. So they took off down the garden path and soon entered a wood. They were smart and knew how to catch birds and trap squirrels and mice and other small animals. They ate some and built cages for the others. When the sister gathered mushrooms and wild berries, she'd feed them to the animals to see if they were poisonous. Then she and her brother ate what was good. The brother preferred to stay by the stream, where he perfected the fish-catching mechanism he'd conceived while gazing at the sky.

Life was carefree, but it wasn't ideal. For instance, they didn't have any salt or dairy products, and they missed these things. So they decided to journey further into the forest to see what they might find.

Sure enough, they soon smell something strange. Lo and behold, it's a house made entirely of Gruyère!

While this is not the siblings' favorite cheese, it is welcome and will do.

The brother coughs discreetly, careful to avoid getting phlegm on the Gruyère, to let any inhabitants of the Dairy Hut know that visitors have arrived. Just as he and his sister are about to chow down on the cheesy gatepost, the front door peels open to reveal the svelte inhabitant of the hut.

"Welcome," she greets them, with just a touch of a British accent.

"Good day, ma'am," the children say sheepishly. "Please excuse us for disturbing you. We were just walking through the forest when we caught a whiff of your house and . . ."

A jab of his sister's elbow in his chest stops the boy in mid-phrase.

“You are not disturbing me, children. I am happy you have come. I rarely have visitors anymore.”

There was an awkward silence.

“You don’t recognize me? Perhaps you’re too young to remember. Let me introduce myself. I am the Dairy Queen.”

“The Dairy Queen! So that is how you are so fortunate as to have a cheese house!” exclaimed the children.

“I am not so fortunate as I may seem,” explained the Dairy Queen, “as I have developed lactose intolerance and cannot eat the products I produce. They provide me with no nourishment and make me ill besides. However, you are welcome to eat your fill.”

So the children gobbled up as much as they could, until they had stomach aches and constipation. The Dairy Queen invited them to spend the night and finish their digestion.

That night she told them tales of the good old days gone by. The children were enchanted by her tales and her manner of telling. She was a pretty, elegant, thin queen who wore top-of-the-line designer fashions and ate only the leaf of a green plant that grew by her doorstep. Both siblings fell under her spell. The brother tried to think of ways to please her, although he’d never worked by his father’s side so didn’t have a heroic male role model to know how to be a man, and the sister tried to become thin herself, although the green plant just wasn’t enough for her and every now and then she’d have to sneak a chunk of cheese.

Compared to the Dairy Queen, they were imperfect. The only way they’d ever be able to stand themselves was to leave. One day they decided to go.

“Your Highness, we are, as you know, precocious children, and you have taught us much. With you we have come to know love and envy, not to mention self-loathing, which are complicated feelings at so tender an age. We have come to understand that Gruyère is among the best things in life, regardless of its odour, but now we must be on our way.”

A single tear marred the perfect complexion of the Dairy Queen. “I understand. You must seek other experiences. But don’t forget me. Please remember the Dairy Hut in the forest, and send other children to keep me company. And sign me up for any high quality mail order catalogs you find on your way.”

The children left with heavy hearts. They turned back once to catch a final glimpse of the Queen, alone in her thin perfection, surrounded by goodness she could not eat.

II.

Once upon a time there was a hard worker. She cleaned and was careful to fluff all the dust from the cracks. The rough surface made this task difficult. There were other obstacles, too, like the long lists that never got crossed off.

Every year her space felt more cramped, but recently she’d been given a wide expanse of floorboards to cover.

She was called Cinderella because the powdery black dust that creeps in everywhere in the city resembles cinders. It is the dirt version of sand in Cairo. It shows up under fingernails, coats windowsills, dusts the soap dish.

Her shoes are covered with the grey powder. The leather is cracked in the crevice that forms when she bends down to Pledge the molding. A big hole in the sole of her right shoe lets rain in to wet her sock.

This morning the bedroom is a mess. As she reaches down to lift the pillow from the space between the bed and the wall where it always slips, two mice run out. One large and one small, slick and quick.

The word on the streets is that these little fellows are friends of Cinderella’s, and even help get the job done, but this is just another false rumour put out by the authorities—and Disney. The little guys always mean more work, which is what anyone can tell you who knows the difference between ordinary dirt and a mouse turd. She surveys for damage and sees her flowered housecoat lying on the floor. Expecting the worst, she picks it up. No turds, but the mice gnawed big holes in the cloth.

So now they're after the clothes off her back! Her wardrobe was already limited. Her overcoat, for instance, was getting snarly and thin in the seams, and there's a big hole in the pocket. When she holds it up to the light, she sees the mice have eaten it too!

Cinderella sat on the bed and sobbed. For the moment she was overcome. The combination of dirt and despair threatened to drive her out. Without protection! With holes in her shoes and no overcoat! Not even a decent housecoat!

"Damn those *sourcis*! I mean *souris*!" She'd made this mistake before. She always confused the French word for mice, *souris*, with the slang word for pin money or small change. Once when she'd spent all her savings on a trip to France to learn about the best things in life, she'd thought friends talking about "sourcis" were keeping mice in a change purse. She could use that change now.

She blew her nose and shrieked when she spotted the tall, thin, swan-necked woman in a tutu in the corner.

"Hello. Don't you recognize me? I'm. . . . Nevermind. I'm here to give you a tip."

"I'm not permitted to accept tips."

"It's more of an opportunity. I can help you out of the no options you live with. I started off like you—low, dirty, practically a scullery maid, nearly in the gutter—and now look what a great outfit I'm wearing!"

"It's lovely."

"I can help you get a job. I have a friend who's opening a nightclub based on one in Paris, and if you can work with him, you can kiss this gig good-bye."

Cinderella wasn't very big on nightclubs. Her fantasy date was more along the lines of a light supper at a quiet restaurant. But she was eager to try something less dusty.

“What will I do for clothes? Who’ll hire me wearing these rags?” She poked at her shabby overcoat.

“Just leave it to me.”

The tutu-clad lady zapped Cinderella a few times with a yo-yo she’d hidden in the tulle as she mumbled over her.

“I’ll just go to the neighbor’s to borrow some thread for this button. For sewing this button back on. For fastening this item of clothing that’s come undone. For this ball gown needed for a special occasion. For this organdy soufflé Shirred with waffle piqué. For this magenta taffeta with yellow yolk trim. For this watermark silk shot with jet beads gathered into the wasp-waisted bodice of black moire. Tomorrow is not soon enough for inset sleeves to taper into raglan! Grossgrain binding, the zipper teeth want to tear into the silver lining. The merino wool penetrates the needle’s eye. The seam won’t stay until brocade drapes the light of day.”

Cinderella gasped as the breath was pressed out of her. She found herself bound in one of those skin tight leather numbers topped by a satin bustier.

“Are you sure these clothes are still in?”

“Trust me. I know what he likes.”

By now Cinderella expected a limo, but the ballerina-look-alike stepped to the curb and whistled for a mere yellow cab. At the nightclub, Cinderella discovered the job was as a dancer and clothes really weren’t necessary. The management supplied the g-string.

This wasn’t what she’d had in mind. It was hardly her idea of the best things in life. But it would be a change—and much less dusty.

She took her place in a long line with other women trying to break in, trying to break out of the no options they were living with. One by one, they entered the manager’s office bright and determined, and soon left in a huff or in tears.

When the bored-looking manager came to the door for the hundredth time and said, “Next,” Cinderella bunched her overcoat over her arm so the holes wouldn’t show and strode into the office, hoping the cracks in her shoes wouldn’t detract from her stylish but uncomfortable outfit.

Once she was alone with him, Cinderella noticed the manager was darkly attractive in a scary kind of way. Despite his weariness, he had charm and an alarming yet exciting intensity about him. Regardless of her policy on not mixing work with pleasure, Cinderella felt the tug of desire.

He smiled and she saw herself reflected in his teeth.

He reached under his desk and pulled out a pair of six inch stiletto heels.

“There is only one position, and it will go to the girl who can wear these shoes.”

So that was why everyone was so upset. They already had backaches from their waitressing jobs, and now they were going to have to dance on stilts, too.

As he handed her the first shoe, she noticed how small it was. She prepared to try stuffing her foot in, but it slipped on easily. After all, she wore size four.

The manager’s breath came more quickly as he leaned over to look. He pressed a button on the tape player on his desk. A lovely melody wafted out. “I know you. I walked with you once upon a dream.” “At last,” he said. “Dance for me,” he said, stroking her ankle.

Now she wanted to get away. She felt smothered and took a big gulp of air.

“Excuse me,” she said. “I forgot a big dustball under the bed.” She ran off, leaving the stiletto behind in his hand.

And the manager held that shoe and cried. He sent his henchmen out to search for her, but she evaded them and found a safer job. She was never again visited by the tall woman in a tutu, although she sometimes spied her on street corners, hailing the last available yellow cab.

III.

If Snow White and Eve both eat an apple and fall—down, from grace—are they the same woman? If Paradise is over, what does she wake up into?

She and the Prince start wandering, because his castle has been repossessed.

At the laundromat, she thinks back on life with the dwarves. Things were simple then. Now the work has to be shared by two instead of seven.

Life with the Prince is far from easy. Sometimes she thinks it would have been better to stay asleep. She had ambitious dreams then. When she woke up, she had gray hair.

The stepmother was pleased to see that Snow White was no longer the fairest of them all. She'd had plastic surgery while her rival was sleeping off the effects of too much knowledge, and now her taut, angular features graced the cover of all the glossy magazines. Just bones and eyes.

Snow White winced every time she went to the drugstore for tampons, or the newsstand for cigarettes, so for a while she sent the Prince on these errands for her.

She was grateful the Prince had decided to kiss her. Not every man would be so willing to rescue a woman who'd lived with seven men, even if they were dwarves, even if her name was Snow White.

Snow White skimped and saved. When she and the Prince had children, she dressed them all in red. The eldest Princess showed great promise and took dancing lessons from a young age. When the Prince left, he gave her a microscope, and the next year he sent her a telescope. Her father wanted her to understand vastness. They'd talk long distance about how difficult it is to understand the ends of things, while Snow White struggled to feed the family.

The eldest Princess showed great progress. No longer did she learn five new five-letter words from her father each night. Now she was studying French.

IV.

Bon. Allons-y.

Il était une fois deux soeurs. L'une était riche, sans enfants. L'autre était pauvre, veuve en plus, avec cinq enfants. Elle n'avait pas assez à manger. Une fois, elle est allée chez sa soeur pour demander un morceau de pain.

“Soeur, mes enfants sont en train de mourrir de faim. Est-çe que je peux avoir un morceau de pain?”

“Non!”

Elle l'a chassé de la porte.

Mais, quand le mari est revenu chez lui, il a eu envie d'un morceau de pain. Mais, quand il a commencé de couper le bout, du sang rouge a coulé.

Did you get that? Okay, I'll explain.

Once upon a time, there were two sisters.

One was rich, with no children.

“Hello. Don't you recognize me? I am the Dairy. . . .”

The other one was poor—said she was a widow but there was no evidence of a marriage license—with five kids, on public assistance, food stamps running out. Her kids are still hungry, so she goes to her rich sister to ask for a handout.

“Sister, could you spare some leftover bread?”

“No!”

And she shut the door on her poor sister. When the rich sister's husband came home, he was hungry for bread.

“More mergers! More acquisitions! What do we have tonight dear? A little rye, a little pumpernickel, some sourdough with Gruyère?”

But when he cut into the bread, blood splattered everywhere.

He was so surprised, he knocked over a candelabra and the house caught on fire. It spread to the neighbor's house and down the block and raged through the entire development. Then the city was in flames, burning down!

And the only survivor was the rich sister. She wandered about amidst the ashes, weeping tears of remorse. Wherever a tear fell, a tree sprang up. Soon she was surrounded by a forest. Then her tears turned to cheese, and she fashioned a Dairy Hut for shelter.

And the cheese stands alone
the cheese stands alone
Hi ho the derry-o
the cheese stands alone.

V.

Cinderella washes the floors and the windows. She saves the leftovers and makes soup. She enjoys this soup and considers it among the best things in life because it is delicious and cost free. She makes things now, and words, and puts them on display or gives them away.

Everything turns to work in her hands. It's what she knows how to do. Sometimes she meditates on chance. Or on how things happen in time. She often goes back to what she knew first—cleaning. When she cleans, her blood moves, and the blood in turn moves her mind.

Her mind wanders into corners. She follows with her broom and pail. She is grateful for the hard wood and long, smooth planks. She thinks—about sisal matting. Last Spring, in a store filled with elegant imports and tight men in manager suits, she'd seen a mouse eating the sisal matting that was part of the luxurious display of unnecessary things.

“Look, a mouse.”

The tight men were unamused, at a loss; they put the security guard in charge.

“What is he doing?” she asked her companion, afraid to look.

“He’s beating it with his night stick,” was the reply.

She didn’t stick around to find out what became of the small rodent with the temerity to wander out among the stuffed bunnies laid out for Easter. (It crosses her mind that on Easter Day the remaining rabbits might rise from their stuffed state and join the mouse in devouring what remained of the matting—if the mouse had the sense to withdraw before the law.)

The law is also elsewhere, busy banning things, like body parts in art and queers in Colorado and fairy tales because of violence. As far as the evil stepmother ordering Snow White’s heart torn out, why that had happened to her more than once already, and it wasn’t so bad in the long run, you got over it, although it was very painful at the time.

She has to stand up to the law. She and Snow White are sisters under the skin. She likes cleaning, Snow White kept house for the dwarves. They’d both lived like outlaws with various men, and each had an appetite for freedom and apples. If they stopped Snow White’s story, might not hers be next?

Her story? Her story about the mouse? Her difficulty with responsibility. She’d said,

“Look, a mouse”

to remind the men that they were mortal. But she hadn’t thought of what the consequences might be for the mouse. She hadn’t thought that the men, annoyed by this sign that their mighty fortress of objects could be invaded by the lowest of creatures, might want to snuff out the furry fellow. She’d rather not take responsibility for that.

This is why action and speech are so difficult. All those unforeseen consequences fall down around you. But act now, speak now, she must. Time is changing and she hurries to fill it as it rushes by.

Speech is the body part of thinking, the voice of the mind. Writing is the blood and mind mixing to speak through the fingers, through the hands.

She gives her mind a rest. She cleans more slowly, and looks for apples to assuage her hunger.