

Translated extract from

Marjaleena Lembcke
Ein Märchen ist ein Märchen ist ein Märchen
Illustrationen: Sybille Hein
NP Buchverlag
Wien – Linz – St. Pölten 2004
ISBN 3-85326-285-6

pp. 5-19, 49-56

Marjaleena Lembcke
A Fairy Tale is a Fairy Tale is a Fairy Tale
Illustrations: Sybille Hein

Translated by Helena Ragg - Kirkby

(pp. 5-19)

Once upon a time, there lived a King, a Queen and a Princess in an enormous fairy-tale castle surrounded by a beautiful rose garden. The castle had five turrets, and in every turret there was a room. There was a ballroom whose walls were covered in paintings of Snow White, the Little Mermaid, the Seven Dwarves and other fairy-tale characters. The royal family took their breakfast in a yellow room; they ate their midday meal in a green room; and used a blue room for their evening repast. In the castle there was also a library with a purple carpet into which was woven a fire-breathing dragon. The books on the shelves contained fairy-tales from every land on earth. The King's valet, the Queen's chamber-maid (who was also the Princess's governess), the cook and a couple of other servants lived in the castle. They had their quarters in the cellar, which also housed the kitchen with its seven stoves and a huge table for preparing food. The cook used all the stoves.

On Mondays she put her pots on the smallest stove, which could accommodate four pots. On Tuesdays she used the second stove, which had space for six pots or pans at once – and so on, until Sunday came. On Sundays she used the seventh stove, which was so huge that she could cook sixteen different meals all at the same time.

Around the castle and the rose garden there stood the little houses of the people over whom the King would one day rule. The outside walls of the houses were painted in cheerful colours and looked most inviting. But they were empty. Nobody lived in them yet. The King often walked through his castle, imagining the future of his people who didn't yet so much as exist. The Princess walked through the garden, breathing in the scent of the blooming roses. The Queen crept through the dark corridors at night, for she suffered from insomnia.

A new day dawned upon the castle. The King and the Princess had just got up. They had dressed with the help of their servants, and were now sitting in the royal yellow breakfast room waiting for their breakfast.

Marie, who was the Princess's governess but who also had a large number of other things to do, appeared wheeling the gilt tea-tray. Crispy pieces of toast; raspberry, blackberry, blackcurrant and gooseberry jam; exotic fruits; seven types of cheese; sausage and bacon; coffee and cocoa. Marie poured the King a cup of coffee and gave the Princess a mug of cocoa. The King took a tiny sip of hot coffee while the Princess slurped her cocoa and waited for the servant to spread jam on her toast. But nothing happened. Marie remained standing by the long table, looking as if she had been turned to stone.

“Marie!” shouted the King in a loud voice. “Marie!”

But Marie didn't so much as bat an eyelid. The King called for his valet, who was standing by the door of the dining room.

“Ludwig!” he called – but answer came there none.

“Ludwig, have you gone deaf? I’m speaking to you!”

“No, your Majesty! Yes, your Majesty, I can hear you – but I can’t do anything. My hands are tied”.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Has someone taken you prisoner?”

“No, your Majesty, but the author’s last sentence was: ‘the faithful servant Ludwig stood by the door of the breakfast room’. I haven’t had further instructions!”

The King sighed. “This slavish dependence on the story! So is the word of a writer worth more than the word of a King? And you, my dear daughter, stop staring at your plate. Could you please just spread your own jam on your own toast for once in your life?”

The Princess tossed back her golden curls and fixed her father with her most icy princess stare. “And what about Marie?” she asked. “What’s she going to do if I spread butter and jam on my toast myself?”

“You let Marie worry about that. Servants have always got things to do – assuming they want to do them”.

The King shook his royal head. “I really should take more of an interest in your upbringing – your mother certainly doesn’t”, he said.

“That’s not her fault”, replied the Princess. “After all, she does have to spend most of the day in bed if she’s awake all night!”

At that moment the door opened and the Queen entered the room. She was wearing a mauve dressing gown and slippers of the same colour. She held her hand over her mouth, yawning prodigiously. “Yet another night without a wink of sleep. I do wish you could do something about it, dearest. I spend the whole night wandering around the slumbering castle, and during the day I’m supposed to lie in bed playing Sleeping Beauty. Where’s the young man who’s responsible for this fairy-tale?”

The Queen let out another huge yawn. Then she said, “Marie, pour me a cup of coffee please”.

Marie looked at her silently and didn’t move a muscle.

“What’s the matter with her?” asked the Queen, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

“The young writer has presumably done a bunk”, explained the King. “The servants won’t do anything without his instructions”.

“Oh splendid!” said the Queen. “If he’s not issuing any more instructions, I’ll do whatever I fancy. I’ll stay up all day and won’t go to bed until the stars are in the sky and the moon has come up. What’s more, I’ll choose myself a new name. I mean: Queen of the Night. What a ridiculous name! Suitable for a cactus at best!”

“I’ll find myself a handsome prince”, said the Princess.

The King shook his head.

“There’s a long time to go before you need a prince, thank goodness. And in any case, I don’t want to be bothering with some old fairy-tale prince just yet. Now, my question is this: do we *actually* need the writer? What will happen to us if the young man doesn’t come back? Do we *actually* have any kind of life outside the pages of a fairy-tale?”

“That was *actually* a lot of questions”, teased the Queen. “So he didn’t call you King Question-Mark for no reason. You always have a head full of worries and questions!”

“Nonsense! I’m *not* called King Question-Mark: all the question mark means is that he hasn’t found a suitably dignified name for me yet. But perhaps we really shouldn’t let someone else dictate what’s going to happen to us – not least because there’s no one here at present to make the effort! Perhaps we ought to learn to take control of our own lives”, said the King. He strutted to and fro for a long time, talking and gesticulating wildly, putting questions to himself and answering them too. Finally he stopped strutting and looked at the Queen, hoping that she was about to answer his last royal question. But she had fallen asleep.

“Every new departure should start with this question: why am I going to do what I’m about to do?” said the King.

“Well I never!” The Queen opened her eyes. “That’s exactly what I’ve been saying all along. The young man, our writer, has no imagination! How’s he ever supposed to write a fairy-story if he can’t even come up with a name for his King?!”

The King shook his head. “You weren’t listening to me – yet again. I’ve long since stopped talking about the writer’s imagination!”

“He jolly well does have an imagination! And he likes me best of all his characters. He’d marry me off, only he can’t find a prince who’s worthy of me”, interjected Princess Rose Red, smiling proudly.

“Even if he did find a prince, you’re undoubtedly too young! I’ve already told you that. Don’t spend your time dreaming about the future: just enjoy your childhood”, said the King.

“And how do you do that?” asked the Princess. “Quite apart from anything else, I’ve not got so much as a friend – male *or* female – to play with”.

“That would be a matter for the writer”, said the Queen, yawning.

“I can’t help noticing that you two have no desire to listen to my concerns”, said the King. “That being the case, we should perhaps turn our attention to breakfast. Who knows when we’ll next get anything to eat”.

They ate and ate, until all the bread had been eaten up, all the bowls were empty and the coffee and cocoa had all been drunk.

The Queen yawned and fought her tiredness; the Princess felt bored and started twisting her curls into plaits. The King picked away at one of his molars with a golden toothpick, frowning as he did so. Then he looked out of the window at the castle garden, which was normally a rich profusion of flowers. Red and white petals fell to the ground from the clusters of roses, and green leaves hung lifelessly from the branches as if they had spent days without water in a hot July sun.

“The writer isn’t bothered about us and our lives”, remarked the King, and sighed.

“Oh, he’s been away loads of times before. Just forget about it. This is what’s called a creative break”, said the Queen.

The King pointed to the garden with his finger. “Then our garden is taking a break, too. The roses are already over; the leaves are hanging off the trees; and the butterflies have flown away. And our servants are taking a break as well. That is, they’re not doing anything at all. They probably won’t move again until the writer tells them to”.

“They’ve got to learn to act for themselves! They don’t have to obey every single one of the writer’s words!” said the Queen. “After all, we’re here too”.

“But for how much longer?” asked the King.

“Oh, we’re as right as rain”, replied the Queen. “The store-rooms are full of food, I hope, and if the servants aren’t going to do their jobs, then well I never! We’ll simply have to serve ourselves”, said the Queen.

The King shivered. “It’s so cold, it could be winter. Something’s not right!”

The Princess stuck the tip of her plait into her mouth and climbed onto the Queen’s lap. She suddenly felt terribly small. The King stood behind their chair, and put his arms round both of them. All of a sudden, they were frightened.

“We must look for the writer”, said the King.

Marie still remained rooted to the spot, but huge tears poured from her eyes.

“For goodness’ sake, girl, stop weeping – your tears are smudging the writing!” cried the Queen anxiously.

*

The writer was walking around the lake in the middle of the town. It was a lovely day; the yachts were tied up at the quay, and outside the cafés people were sitting and drinking coffee, tea or beer. Seagulls flew over the lake; the thrushes and sparrows picked up breadcrumbs; the sky was blue and the trees were green. Everyone was wearing thin summer clothing and squinting happily into the hot July sun. The writer felt lonely. He didn’t have many friends, for he enjoyed the company of the characters in his stories best of all. Now and then someone rang him or dropped by, and sometimes he received a card from an old schoolfriend.

They’ve all achieved something already, thought the writer. They earn money and buy their own house. Proper houses – not fairy-tale castles. He didn’t in fact want to buy a house, and he rarely gave any thought to money. But he did wonder what he ought to do about his future.

Suddenly, a young lad bumped into him. He was perhaps thirteen or fourteen, and looked rough: his jeans were ripped, and his T-shirt hung around his meagre chest.

“Oy”, said the youth. “Don’t you recognise me?”

The writer shook his head. He pulled a coin from his coat pocket and gave it to him. He was just about to ask the lad how he thought they knew each other – but he had already vanished again.

And then it struck him. The lad came from one of the stories that he’d never finished.

He thought about all the many stories that he’d never finished. What on earth were all the children doing whom he’d sheltered in his stories for a few days? Where were the youths sleeping now whom he’d found wandering in the streets? And he thought about his fairy-tale. What would become of the royal family if he left them in the lurch? The beautiful castle would go to wrack and ruin; the gaily coloured little houses around the castle would never be inhabited; and nobody would walk in the rose garden. And the King, the Queen, and the sweet little Princess: what would become of them all?

(pp. 49-56)

Suddenly a young man was standing before them. His lips were moving, but he was speaking so softly that neither the King nor the Queen nor the Princess could hear what he was saying.

“He very probably wants money”, said the King, adding: “You don’t understand me, but I’ll tell this you all the same. We haven’t got any money. We live in a castle with many fabulously beautiful rooms; we get a royal breakfast, a princely lunch, the tastiest cream cakes for tea, and a slap-up evening meal. We use cutlery made of gold and silver, and eat off the most delicate porcelain plates; our clothes are made of silk, velvet and satin; we have a splendid garden. We have everything – and yet we have nothing. And that’s why we can’t give you or anyone else any bit of this whole rich splendour. For we’re just characters in a book. Not that you can really call it a book! It’s just a heap of loose pages; a fairy-tale that might never be completed”.

The young man stuck his hands in his trouser pockets. “Which page?” he asked.

“My word! You can understand us!” cried the King. “Where are you from? How come you can speak our language? What do you mean, ‘which page’?”

The young man only answered the last question. “I’m Page Thirteen. I was torn out”.

“Torn out? Out of the story? Who on earth would do that?” cried the Princess indignantly. “What’s your name, you poor creature?” she asked most sympathetically.

“I already told you. Page Thirteen – I don’t have another name. I’m just an insignificant secondary character. All it says about me is: ‘a poor, filthy boy stands on the street corner holding his hand out. He’s begging’. Then the author just left me out because he thought he didn’t need me”.

“Doesn’t need you! Doesn’t need someone standing on the street and begging! How dare he!” cried the Princess. “Of course he needs you. What do you think, mother?”

“I don’t know if anyone needs *him*, but *he* undoubtedly needs *someone*. He’s still just a child”.

“How old are you?” asked the Princess.

“How am I supposed to know? I’m not important enough to be told such things. I might be thirteen, since I appeared on page thirteen of the story”.

“Don’t be silly. Page numbers have nothing to do with a person’s age. What’s the name of the writer who tore you out?”

“I don’t know. He isn’t well known”.

“And he isn’t likely to be either, if he carries on tearing whole pages out of his stories. My name is Rose Red”, said the Princess.

“A lovely name”, whispered the youth, and the Princess bestowed a radiant smile upon him.

The King pondered. Now, this was a completely unexpected situation! There he was, fighting with his family for survival – and along came this boy whose fate seemed even more dire than their own. A boy who clearly needed help. But how are you supposed to help someone when you’re not even sure yourself what’s going to happen next – whether you’ll get home; whether you’ll even have a roof over your royal head – not to mention a secure future.

“Father, we’re going to take him with us, aren’t we?” asked the Princess.

“Take him where?” retorted the King. “We haven’t found the author – and we don’t know the way back, either”.

“We could go to *my* author”, said the boy. “He’ll be thrilled if I’ve got a real royal family with me. Perhaps he’ll let me back into the story. I could even demand it as my reward for inventing you!”

“You didn’t invent us: you found us, my dear boy – and nobody nowadays finds it thrilling to have a royal family dragged along to meet them. We’ve long since had our day, I fear... So, what kind of story was it? Was it about young and old people? Were there tasty meals in it?”

“I didn’t meet any old people; I don’t think there were any. He didn’t describe the meals, either: this was a story about street urchins. They don’t get tasty meals! But there were loads of children in the story. It was supposed to be a children’s story. Only... the writer didn’t just get rid of *me*: he booted out lots of other children too”.

“Well I never”, said the Queen. “A children’s story with all the children thrown out. Fantastic!”

“My dear”, said the King irritably, “since the writer stopped correcting your language, it has left a lot to be desired. Don’t start every sentence with ‘well I never’!”

“Well I never! Now you’re starting to get hung up on petty trifles. Don’t you realise that that’s precisely the reason why pages were thrown away? Because of such pernicky nonsense! Because someone doesn’t speak correctly, or eats noisily, or just stands there begging. And whose fault is it? Whose fault? Who gives them the words? Who makes them eat noisily in the first place? Who sends them out begging? Well?”

“You’re absolutely right, my dear. Quite right. We’ll not be dictated to any more. We’ll try to find our way back to the castle. The castle is ours, and we have the right to bring a guest with us!” said the King decisively.

Moved by their encounter with the poor boy, the royal family forgot their fear for their own lives for a moment.

“Shouldn’t we go looking for the other children who were thrown out?” asked the Queen.

“Oh, yes!” said the Princess. “We want to take all of them with us”.

“Do you know where the other children are?” the King asked the boy from page thirteen.

He picked his left nostril and furrowed his brow. He had no great desire to look for the other children and take them with him. He was looking forward to a home in the castle and a scrumptious meal. He had already pictured his new shoes, trousers and shirt, and had imagined himself visiting his old fellow exiles with a full stomach. Of course, he would take them something. That much was clear. It wasn’t the case that he would have begrudged the others a bit of happiness – it would just have been nice to be able to play the role of the great benefactor and, for once, to have more than the others, and to flaunt his own happiness.

