PICTURES OF A PRINCESS

a fable

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"HONEY, WHY DON'T you go with her?"

Jeff heard his wife's words, but his mind couldn't process them. It was more than the summer heat slowing his reaction to Connie, more than the exhaustion caused by standing in long lines beneath the Santa Cruz sun. Sherri's tiny hand went into his and he gripped it, wondering which of them was more nervous, he or his daughter. He'd gone dry-mouthed just at the sight of the blonde before them. Now that Connie's words were sinking in, the thought of getting closer to Princess Abigail made his stomach shudder as if filled with horseflies.

"Go on," Connie encouraged, holding her phone sideways to take a picture. "Go on, Sherri. Daddy's coming with you."

A shy smile plumped Sherri's cheeks. She wasn't afraid of the blonde in the Princess getup, just bashful when it came to new people. Princess Abigail was Sherri's favorite, whether in storybooks or animated film. Going to The Tulip Tower was half the reason they'd made this trip to Fairytale Land, an amusement park that was part Disney World and part renaissance fair. It was Sherri's sixth birthday and *The New Adventures of Princess Abigail* had recently been turned into a cartoon series. Jeff had watched it many times; sometimes with his daughter, and other times alone at night, after everyone else had gone to bed. But *that* Abigail was just a digitally enhanced drawing. The one who sat upon the golden throne was real flesh and blood.

Sherri pulled him forward, having already started walking toward the princess now that his presence had given her courage. Jeff shuffled in his sandals, holding his breath as they moved past a rainbow of tulips besetting the velveteen row. All the people waiting in line behind them seemed to disappear—the cacophony of excited children, crying babies, and grumbling parents falling mute as Jeff entered a strange state, awake but dreaming.

"She's a princess, Daddy," Sherri explained. "A *real* princess."

It embarrassed Jeff to realize he believed her.

When they reached the throne, the park actress portraying Abigail smiled at Sherri but didn't give Jeff so much as a glance. This disappointed and relieved him at the same time. She was the sort of beautiful that hurts a man to look at, the longing and desire strong enough to feel like a physical blow. That she was dressed in the pretty baby blue princess gown and twinkling tiara only intensified the sensation of loss.

"What's your name, sweetie?" Abigail asked.

Jeff blinked, rocked by his envy of his daughter.

"I'm Sherri," she replied softly, still shy but smiling with what remained of her baby teeth.

"How old are you?"

"I'm six! Today's my birthday." She turned to Jeff. "Right, Daddy?"

When his daughter looked at him, Princess Abigail did too, for the first time. His heart fell into his stomach with a souring splash. The woman's eyes were like topaz, the soft skin of her face as pale as winter flurries. Her smile was warm. If it was forced, the act was convincing.

"That's right," Jeff managed. "Six. Today's her birthday."

He winced internally, feeling like an imbecile for repeating his daughter's words instead of coming up with something more engaging. Abigail turned back to Sherri. He'd blown his chance.

The princess asked his daughter how she was enjoying the park and other rehearsed trivialities, humoring her with the sort of banal questions adults always ask children. Once again, Jeff lost track of what was being said. When Abigail leaned forward, he stared at a curl of golden hair as it fell across her breasts. He tried to imagine the princess pulling down the cups of that dress for him and found it was easy. The breasts would be the type that faced slightly outward, pointing away from her body, smelling of rose peddles and just as soft.

Connie called to him three times before he snapped back to the real world. When he turned back to his wife, she shooed him away with a wide grin, the laugh lines of her face making her look so much older to him than she had just moments ago.

"Get in there," Connie said with a giggle.

He blushed, thinking—ridiculously—that she meant *get inside* Abigail. His wife pointed and he saw Sherri sitting on the princess's lap, all toothy smiles. Princess Abigail was waving him forward for the picture.

"Don't be shy," the princess joked. "I don't bite."

But he liked to imagine she would.

Sherri was still talking about Abigail when they went to dinner, and Jeff was still thinking about her. She'd been so perfect, and exact replica of the illustration of Princess Abigail in *Fables from the World of Nether*, the book he'd had as a child. In the newer books Sherri had, the princess was essentially the same, but the artwork (instead of being hand-drawn and lifelike the way his childhood book had been) was more cartoonish—the head too big, eyes too big, elbows too pointy. His book had made Princess Abigail look real; Sherrie's book made her look like she belonged on a cereal box.

The animated series was the same, the character being ripped out of royalty-free fairytales and capitalized on by a single entertainment conglomerate. Jeff wished he still had his copy of *Fables from the World of Nether*. But even if he were still in possession of it, the illustrations of Abigail would be long gone. When he'd drawn closer to puberty, he'd ripped them out of the book and carried them folded in his pocket so he could look at them any time he desired. One day he'd forgotten to remove them from his jeans before tossing them in the hamper. Mom washed them and in doing so washed away his princess. And he'd never been able to find another copy at libraries, bookstores, or even online. A tale truly as old as time, Princess Abigail's story was available in countless volumes but the artwork that had made him fall in love with her had vanished, taking part of him away with it.

"What a day we've had," Connie beamed. Sherri was on her lap now—*a lesser lap*, Jeff thought. "And to think we get to do it all again tomorrow!"

They'd bought a full weekend pass and were staying at the attached hotel. Now that they'd spent a day in the park, he and Connie agreed three days was overkill. Fairytale Land wasn't as big as Universal or Disneyworld. At least there were some new shows on Saturday. Not that they'd entertain him much.

Unless she's in them.

"And what great pictures," Connie said, flipping through her phone. She giggled. "Except for Daddy. I think he was tired here, huh, Sher?"

Sherri giggled too and Connie turned the phone so he could see the photo. He sat on a fake boulder beside Princess Abigail, who held Sherrie in her lap. Though the two of them were beaming at the camera, Jeff's head was turned toward them instead.

Connie showed it to Sherri again. "I guess he just liked seeing *his* little princess with a big princess, huh?"

Jeff waited for a knowing glance from his wife, but it never came. She hadn't known what he'd really been looking at. In her eyes, they were having a jovial family vacation, nothing more. Jeff wasn't preoccupied by carnal thoughts about an amusement park princess half his age. He'd just gotten too much sun and too much greasy carnival food.

But he knew the truth and it was bitter. The way he was feeling now, he'd give up his wife and daughter for one night in the enchanted forest between Abigail's legs. He almost snickered at the thought but drowned it with another gulp of beer. The glass empty, he motioned to the waitress for a third. Now his wife's eyes *did* hold judgment, telling him he'd had enough without having to say it aloud.

"Just one more," he said.

The room had two queen beds. After Sherri fell asleep in hers, Jeff cozied up to Connie, pressing his crotch into her backside as he spooned her. Connie's silky nightgown rode up a little as his erection formed, poking out of the fly in his boxers.

She inched away. "Honey, no."

"She's fast asleep. We'll do it nice and quiet under the blanket."

"No, Jeff. Not now. Not here."

"Then let's go to the bathroom where we can lock the door. We can take a shower together like we used to and—"

"I already took one, Jeff, remember? Besides, I'm tired."

Jeff would have been too, had Princess Abigail not energized him. His mind was racing, loins stirring like a bubbling cauldron. He pressed into his wife's backside again and fantasized of Abigail curling down the bra cups of that blue gown, her breasts coming free and her squeezing them together in her long, white gloves. He envisioned the bottom of the dress curling up, revealing the fluffy petticoat and matching white stockings beneath, the petticoat's ruffles shifting as she closed and opened her legs. *Peek-a-boo*.

Connie turned to face him. Without her makeup she looked wan and waxen. She almost reminded Jeff of his mother-in-law.

"I said *no*, damnit," she whisper-shouted. "Now go to sleep."

She turned over again, away from him, and he scooted all the way to other side of the bed, bitter now, even angry. He punched his pillow for emphasis and heard Connie sigh. Once he was sure she was asleep too, he went to the bathroom and masturbated, his princess taking him in warm and deep, soft gasps of pleasure escaping her, that angel-blonde hair so long it wrapped about his entire body like a rhumba of boa constrictors. When he ejaculated into the sink, his mind suddenly betrayed him and he thought of Connie, lying beneath the bed he and Princess Abigail fucked upon, caught between the mattress and the box spring and crushed to death by every thrust.

PICTURES OF A PRINCESS

Unable to sleep, Jeff went downstairs to the bar. It seemed this was the one part of the whole place that wasn't pretending it was the 16th century. There were some decorations keeping to the theme of the park—shields and swords mounted on walls, plastic ivory clinging to pillars—but Aerosmith was playing on the jukebox, and everyone was dressed in modern clothes, even the staff. Jeff bellied up to the bar and took a stool, running one hand through his hair. Once it had hung nearly to his shoulders. Now it was just beginning to thin. He'd thought of beer on the way down in the elevator, but seeing the glimmering bottles of bourbon behind the bar changed his thirst. The male bartender fetched him a cocktail and Jeff spun sideways on his stool, people watching.

And there she was.

Or at least he thought it was her. The overdone makeup was gone, as was the Fairytale Land gown and tiara. Worst of all, the yellow hair was now a dark russet, like copper stains and old blood. *A wig?* But despite these changes there was no mistaking her face. She still looked like the illustration that was his guide when teenage hormones had confused him. That image had comforted him when he heard his father beating the living shit out of his mother. Jeff would hide in the cabinet beneath the kitchen sink and pet the fine paper, its softness helping him breathe.

This Abigail's pallor had not just been talc or something worn at the park. It was real. As real as the lithe body he could now see more of. The top was low cut, offering a sweet cavern of cleavage, and the jeans were tight as flesh. They stretched against her thighs as she sat at the other end of the bar and when she waved hello to the bartender Jeff saw the tattoos the white gloves had covered up by day. A diamond stud pierced one nostril.

Jeff leaned in and stretched his ears but was unable to hear the conversation she made with the bartender. It was brief, but they clearly knew each other in a chummy way. Jeff wondered if she'd ever sucked his cock. He finished his drink and motioned the son of a bitch over.

"Get me another."

The bartender grinned. Was he being friendly or was he mocking Jeff? When he returned with a refill, Jeff tossed him a buck.

"Who is she?" Jeff asked, the whiskey getting the better of him.

The bartender followed his gaze to Abigail. "Oh, she works here. You probably recognize her from the park."

"Princess . . . " But he couldn't finish. He felt suddenly sophomoric, too vulnerable.

"She plays a lot of characters. Sometimes she's a princess, sometimes a witch or a—"

"A *witch*? I find that hard to believe."

The bartender shrugged. "She pulls it off."

Another patron approached and the bartender quickly pocketed Jeff's tip and walked away, leaving him feeling as if he'd been ripped off somehow. This patron also blocked his view of Abigail, so Jeff took his drink and walked over to the end of the bar where she was sitting. His courage surprised him. He doubted he would be so bold if she were still dressed in her gown and gloves and pett—

He stumbled slightly, more from a dent in the tile than drunkenness. He had a buzz, but it was not paying attention that had tripped him up. His eyes were on the princess. Now hers were on him. For a moment he just stood there, those glimmering blue eyes cutting through him like the medieval daggers on the wall behind her. He placed one elbow on the bar, leaving one empty stool between them.

"Hey there," he said with a smile.

Her return smile was merely polite, the smile of a female employee stuck with a flirtatious male customer. She wasn't on the clock, but still had to act like it. She gave him a quick nod of hello and then took out her phone, tapping on it as a deterrent to further interaction with him. Jeff understood all of this, but still proceeded, unsure what he expected to gain but riding the strange whim anyway.

"Remember me?" he asked.

She gave him a second glance. "Sorry, no. Should I?"

Jeff wondered if she was lying to discourage him or if he was really that forgettable. He could believe both.

"Me and my daughter? Sherri? The one celebrating her birthday?"

She shrugged, elbows on the bar, holding up the phone to stare at. "Sorry, but I talk to lil' girls like that all day long and you'd be surprised how many of 'em are here 'cause it's their birthday."

He noticed a difference in her voice. Her tone was deeper than it had been in the land of Tulip Tower. There her voice had been high and flighty with a slight British accent, properly enunciating each word. Now her words tumbled out like trash from an overturned barrel. Comparatively, she seemed almost ghetto, maybe with a touch of hick.

"I got my picture with you too," he said.

She nodded as if to say *yeah, lots of parents do*. The bartender brought her cocktail and she smiled up at him, saying something soft and low Jeff couldn't make out. She gave the bartender a wink and he touched her arm briefly before heading toward Jeff, causing his stomach to swarm with those horseflies again.

"How you doin', bud?" the bartender asked.

Jeff cleared his throat. "What do you mean?"

"Just asking if you need something."

Jeff wanted to tell him he knew damned well what he needed and so did the princess. But the bartender was younger than Jeff and strong-looking, probably one of those surfers that littered the beaches like hermit crabs.

"I don't think I catch your meaning," Jeff managed.

The bartender pointed at Jeff's glass. Nothing but ice left. This hadn't been a jab after all. He handed the bartender the glass and he scurried away again. When Jeff turned back to Princess Abigail, she wasn't there. Jeff scowled. The bartender had created a diversion. Jeff threw enough money on the bar to cover his tab and walked away before the bartender could turn around. He scanned the bar and spotted Abigail's cute little backside swaying as she walked through the side entrance and out to the poolside tiki bar. Jeff strode in defiance, following her into the night.

Dark faces spoke in the shadows like ghosts, the light of the pool casting everything in an ethereal azure not unlike Abigail's eyes. Small, strung lights guided the way to the bar where she now stood, her back to Jeff. He was only two feet away when she turned around in cloud of cigarette smoke. Her eyes had gone black with night.

"Can I help you with something?" she asked sharply, the customer courtesy gone.

He struggled for words, coming up with only one. "Abigail . . . "

They stared at each other then, the princess looking him up and down. She smirked and shook her head. "Okay. C'mon."

She walked by him, and Jeff followed, a puppy with its master. Leading him to a table furthest from the bar, she sat down and crossed her legs.

"Well?" she said.

He took the other seat. Abigail breathed more smoke and slowly spun her drink, the bronze alcohol catching the light of the pool, making it glitter with murky stars.

"Buy you a drink?" he asked, stupid.

"Not yet."

"What're you having?"

"It's called a zombie."

Jeff nodded. "That for when you're a witch?"

"No. That's for when I'm me."

His frown turned upside-down, just like she sang about on her show.

"I knew it," he said. "The witch thing is just, like, an act."

She didn't reply. Instead, she blew smoke rings and put her feet up on the extra chair. Black boots with tall heels covered her up to the knee.

"I *have* seen you before," she said. "Yeah, sure. Seen you many times. Not just here, but at Disneyland. I was Tinkerbell then. There's a scene in *Peter Pan* where she gets stuck in a keyhole. There's a lift of her skirt and in that moment she's totally helpless." She took a long drag and exhaled. "You like that."

Jeff's eyebrows drew together. "I do?"

"Yeah, you do. Even if you don't know it. Even if you've never been to Disney or even seen *Peter Pan*."

"How do you know what I like?" he instantly regretted saying it. It sounded too standoffish. "I mean . . . what do you mean?"

Abigail flicked her butt away and it plunked into the deep end of the pool. No one seemed to notice.

"How's your wife?" she asked.

Jeff bit his lip and looked away.

"Well then," Abigail said, "how's your daughter? You did say it was a little girl, right? Not a son but a daughter. How's she?"

Jeff turned back to her. "I love my daughter."

"I'm sure."

He couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic. He chose to believe not.

"So," Abigail said, "how's she tonight?"

"Enjoying our vacation. Happy to have met you. Probably dreaming of you right now."

"And not alone in that, huh?"

Jeff surprised himself by saying, "Yeah. Definitely not alone in that."

A waitress broke the sudden silence between them. "Last call."

Abigail ordered two zombies and mercifully the waitress went away. Jeff wondered about the order. Was she encouraging him or just getting two for herself?

"They don't let us take 'em home, you know," she said.

He blinked. "What?"

"Not just the wigs and ball gowns. Even the big bear and rabbit costumes come back soiled when they leave park property. Nobody takes 'em home with them."

"That's too bad."

"Is it?" She took out another cigarette and Jeff marveled at how her tight jeans hadn't crushed the pack.

More magic, he thought.

The waitress dropped off the zombies and scurried into the night to end her shift. Jeff hadn't realized it'd gotten so late. Abigail took one glass and sipped, not telling Jeff if he was welcome to the other. When he took it, she said nothing about it.

"That kid in you," she began, "he's not comin' back. You know that, don't you?"

Jeff swallowed hard. "I do."

"Time hurts enough. Every step backward just causes people more pain."

"I know that too."

She paused. "Then you must enjoy pain."

He raised the glass and said, "Guess I do."

She looked out at the night world that had swallowed them. The other tables had emptied, leaving only the patrons sitting at the bar. He was alone with Abigail here in this blue phantasmagoria, as if they hovered within one giant, blue eye—*her* eye. The zombie was sweet—rum, brandy, youth.

Looking at her profile, Jeff had to choke back a sudden gasp, realizing it was the illustration from the back cover of *Fables from the World of Nether*. Her cigarette smoke replicated the fog of that dreamland the artist had created. She was a white swan, a vision of beauty carved in alabaster. *Does alabaster crack easy*? Jeff had almost forgotten about the back cover of the book. Now he remembered the wet, red stain that had ruined it. He'd seen blood splatter from his mother's mouth so many times. He hadn't realized that would be the last.

"A man can do a serious thing," Jeff said, "but it doesn't always pack any real meaning."

"So can a woman."

"But not a princess. She's not like a regular woman. Everything she does has meaning, purpose."

"And why do you suppose that is?"

"Simple." Jeff leaned in. "*Magic*."

The princess stared at him then, the loveliness shining through despite this ugly guise of nose piercings and tattoos and hooker boots. She hadn't turned back into a pumpkin at midnight. This was a test, a sort of glass slipper. She'd been testing him his whole life.

"Magic is how you know so much," Jeff said, "far more than my wife ever could."

"I don't even know your name."

"But I know yours. Known it since I was old enough to read. And even though the paper cutouts are gone . . . I still carry you."

A smile grew wide upon her face and for one sweet moment in time Jeff thought he'd touched her with his confession. But then the laughter came—the horrible, horrible laughter. She laughed so hard she snorted. He felt suddenly so very small, a child looking for a kitchen cabinet to hide in.

"Why're you laughing?" he said. "It's not funny."

Abigail took a deep breath to steady herself, then tossed back what remained of her drink and got out of her chair.

"No," she said, grinning. "It's really not."

She walked away from the table and Jeff realized they were alone in this darkness now, the lights of the tiki bar having gone out, the patrons and hotel staff having vanished.

More magic, he thought.

Jeff got to his feet, following her again, following her all these years. Now that he'd finally come here, having indoctrinated his daughter into loving Princess Abigail enough to convince his wife they had to vacation at Fairytale Land, he wasn't about to let his princess disappear again. She knew the truth. She'd seen it from her tower inside the folds of his book, witnessed everything. Abigail understood all the things he'd been incapable of telling Connie because Abigail had been there for it, been there *for him*.

She opened the gate surrounding the pool and walked out to the rear parking lot of the hotel. The lot and alley were deserted. She approached her golden chariot. It had been transformed into a beige Hyundai, all an illusion. Abigail must have heard his footsteps. She looked over her shoulder but pretended she wasn't looking. She picked up her pace. Then suddenly she was running.

"Don't!" Jeff called out to his princess.

Abigail pressed her magic key (made to resemble a car fob) and two golden orbs came alive at the front of the chariot. She was climbing inside when Jeff took her by the wrist and pulled her back. She struggled against him.

"Put it on!" he said. "I know you have it. You say they don't like you to keep the gowns, but I know the one you wore is your own, Abigail."

"Let go!" She kicked his shin but missed the bone. "Let me go!"

"And go off to Netherland? We'll go together. Just put on the gown. Take off that wig and show me your blonde hair." He pulled at her hair and she shrieked. "You don't have to hide from me. I've never hid from you."

Abigail's scream echoed across the empty lot. It'd been a long time since he'd heard a woman scream like that. Mom had screamed the same way when he'd punished her for drowning his princess in the washing machine. Punished her just like Dad always had, Jeff beating her with his fists and not stopping even after she'd fell unconscious. He'd climbed on top of her and kept on swinging, his arms going back and forth, crushing the bones of her face. His fists seemed to disappear in the pulp. When a glob of blood flew from her mouth it splattered across the book on the nearby end table. *Fables from the World of Nether* was soiled, soiled like a princess gown brought home to be fucked in, coming back to Fairytale Land crusted with semen. The blood wouldn't come off, so Dad threw the book in the trash even as Jeff cried and begged him not to.

"We have to get rid of all the evidence," Dad said. "Anything with blood on it has to go! You don't want to go to jail, do you?" Jeff shook his head. "Then forget the damn book of fairy stories, Jeff. Christ, you're seventeen! Time to grow up! Now help me stuff your mother into the mattress so we can haul it to the dump."

Abigail grabbed his wrists as he yanked at her hair with both hands. Her scalp began to separate and blood spilled down her face, making her

look all the more like the back cover of his long lost book. But there was no blonde hair hiding beneath.

"More magic," he grumbled.

He clawed at her arm, wanting to tear away the fake tattoos, but his nails only dug up more flesh, flesh as soft as pages torn from an old book. The princess kicked at him again, going for his groin. He knew what she wanted; it was the same thing Connie pushed away earlier that night. Abigail's jeans were tighter than his. He'd have to get them off first. He punched her in the face, sending out one tooth and breaking another in half, and he could see his daughter's half-toothed smile shining back at him, his two princesses converging before he swung again and again, blinding one of Abigail's eyes. *Peek-a-boo*. He tore the ugly nose stud out of her face. Sprawled across the hood of her chariot, arms spread out to fly the way she did when she got her wings at the end of her fable, Abigail's boots and jeans came off with surprising ease now that she was no longer moving.

She was his sleeping beauty.

And he had more than just a kiss to give her.

When he came out of the bathroom after washing his hands, Sherri was sitting up in her bed. She and her mother had been sound asleep when he'd come back to the room, but now his daughter was wide awake, her feet dancing a little beneath the blanket. He looked at her little face half-hidden by shadow. A smile with missing teeth greeted him.

"I can't sleep anymore, Daddy."

He came over and sat on the edge of the bed. "Too excited?"

"Yeah. I wanna go to Tulip Tower again. Can we do that first?"

"Sure, sweetheart."

"We'll see Abigail again?"

He thought of the broken body he'd left stripped and bleeding in the darkened lot. If not for the magic, he would worry. But not a day went by in Fairytale Land where Princess Abigail wouldn't greet her visitors and take pictures and sign autographs. She'd be there bright and early; no bruises or split lips or nostrils ripped in half. No cracked skull or violated private parts. There was always a princess somewhere, someone to be blonde and pale and perfect in a blue gown and sparkly tiara. Princess Abigail would go on no matter what had happened overnight, no matter how dark the woods or how hungry the big, bad wolf.

"Yes, Sherri. We'll see her again." He touched his daughter's shoulder. "Our princesses are always there for us."