

From if... and other stories
by
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Happily Ever After

Life began to unravel shortly after the birth of her third child.

“Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water,” their friends had all sung at their wedding ten years earlier. “Jack fell on Jill. Oh, what a thrill! And they lived happily ever after.”

The rewording of the old nursery rhyme had amused them. If only she’d known. The real wording would be more fitting.

“Jack fell down and broke his crown; and Jill came tumbling after.”

Falling into a world of debt changed her. She started to swear. It felt like liberation. “Shit!” She relished the word, which released some of her pent-up rage. She felt she was learning to talk again. Her husband admonished her only once. The children adapted and joined in with delight. They now had more names for each other.

The disintegration had started six months earlier, with the redundancy. They just hadn’t been aware of it.

“You’re a lawyer. How can you be a gardener?” she asked.

“It’s simple,” he replied sarcastically. “I get into the car we should sell to pay this month’s mortgage. I take out an old rake and spade and do the manual labor that was once a hobby. Then I’ll get paid with money we desperately need.”

“But the money’s pathetic.”

“It’s better than unemployment pay!” he barked.

“Just wait—something’s bound to come along.”

“I’ve been waiting for four months. Nothing’s going to come along except greater debt.”

“We could move.”

“We can’t afford to!” he snarled. “Our debts will eat up any money we make selling this place and then we’ll be homeless.”

She watched him leave every morning in his jeans and thought about their youthful hopes. They’d fallen in love, married, and assumed they would live happily ever after. How naïve! But nobody had ever told them the truth: love alone isn’t enough. It took money to complete the fairy tale.

Money had always been tight, pressing at the seams of their relationship. But the redundancy created an extra pressure—insecurity—which brought bitterness and quarrels in its wake.

“Why don’t you go out and get a job?” he’d ask regularly.

At the beginning, she’d replied reasonably. “We both know that paying someone to look after the baby would eat up every penny I earned.”

Later, she became sarcastic. “Because I’m a silly bitch who sits around all day watching soap operas or going to the hairdresser.”

Finally, she screamed in fury. “I do work! I’m still in the fucking kitchen at ten o’clock at night, while you sit on your ass, watching TV!”

She looked in the mirror and caught sight of a woman raving and ranting. A woman who’d let herself go. Hair that just hung, dull and shapeless. Clothes that were old and faded, like the body inside them.

When Jack slammed out of the house one night, she thought, “I also want to run away. From myself.”

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The warm, idealistic world they’d created for their children started to disappear with the goods they sold.

“What are little boys made of?” the seven-year-old Molly sang. “Frogs and snails and puppy dogs’ tails. And what are little girls made of?” she said smugly. “Sugar and spice and all things nice.”

Her five-year-old brother Pete promptly bit her and assured her she wasn’t made of sugar at all.

Gradually, Jill's resentment led to her waging a war. A war on the way she'd been taught to look at the world. A war that was taking hostages: the sugar and spice and all things nice from the children's lives.

"Once upon a time," she read to the children, "there was a poor farmer with a beautiful daughter. The farmer used to boast that his daughter could turn corn into gold. One day, the king heard of this and told the farmer to bring his daughter to the palace to do this feat. Please note, children, what a bloody fool the king is. If the daughter could really do this, why was the farmer so poor?"

The children were used to her angry commentary now.

"I hate to say it, but this time you're right," Molly admitted. "The farmer should have been rich if his daughter was so bloody clever."

"The girl is assured that if she spins the king's corn into gold, she'll marry the prince, become a princess, and eventually a queen; but if she fails, she'll be put to death. Please note, the king is short of money, and so presumably is either crooked or incompetent. Money, again, is the key. If the girl can provide wealth, she'll be bought for the prince as a good buy. There is no question of anything like love here. This is a business deal through and through. You either succeed and reach the top, or you fail and go six feet under."

"She does succeed, doesn't she Mummy?" Pete asked anxiously.

"Of course she does, darling. This is a story, not reality. In comes the ugly old man who offers to do the job for her; but naturally, he's not going to do it for free. He wants as payment her first child when it's born. The girl agrees; the deal is made, and the job is done. So, the girl becomes a princess and has a child. And then, who should appear but the ugly old man for his payment. But now the girl is powerful; she no longer needs the ugly old man, and so she decides to go back on the deal and betray him. And since he's ugly, we're not meant to sympathize with him."

"I sympathize with him, Mummy," said Pete, almost in tears. "It's not fair. If I grow up to be ugly, will people be horrid to me?"

"Don't worry darling, you'll grow up handsome and charming."

"But what if I don't?"

"Then I'll send you for plastic surgery."

The answer calmed everybody down, and the story continued.

“The ugly old man was quite generous. He decided to give the girl another chance. ‘I tell you what,’ he said. ‘If you can find out what my name is, I’ll let you keep the child.’ The princess immediately used her power to learn the man’s name. But that wasn’t enough for her. After she’d discovered his name through spies, she teased him to distraction until he jumped so hard, he disappeared through the earth. And that was the end of him.”

“That was horrid of her,” said Molly.

“No, dear, it was sensible. After all, if she’s beautiful, she’s a heroine, and she can get away with anything, so why not get away with being as big a pig as you can?”

“I think I’ll have to have plastic surgery too,” said Molly unhappily. “I hope we can afford it by then.”

Jill felt terrible. What was she doing to her children? She tried to reassure them.

“Nowadays, brains are more important than looks. You’ll develop your brains and make sure nobody ever takes advantage of you.”

The campaign extended to the TV. The children adored watching family sitcoms, but they made Jill feel worse. These idealized TV families all seemed to find patience and love for each other, despite their money problems, whereas she was a walking time bomb. Was she the only person who was reduced to a state of near-permanent rage by poverty?

Every morning, she told herself, she’d be different. She’d be patient. She’d protect her children from her warped perspective. But she could never make it through the day.

“I’m going to be just like that Mummy when I grow up,” Molly said while they watched TV one night.

“That’s nice, and how will you afford such expensive clothes?”

“I mean, I’ll behave like her. Nice and loving!”

“You mean as lovingly as you behaved to your brother when he broke your doll?”

“That’s different,” said the child, almost in tears.

“No, it’s not!” shouted Jill, dramatically pointing to the television. “That’s what’s different. It’s not real, it’s all make-believe.”

“At least in the make-believe world, mothers don’t shout all the time.”

“I don’t shout all the time!” Jill shouted at her daughter.

Somewhere in the back of her head, a younger version of herself cringed.

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“Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair,” she heard Molly read to Pete. “Rapunzel was lucky, she was given away to a wicked witch.”

“Why was that lucky?” Pete asked.

“Well, she knew her own mother wasn’t a wicked witch.”

“But wasn’t her own mother wicked to give her away?” Pete asked.

Molly threw the book down. “You’re too stupid to understand!” she yelled.

Pity filled Jill. Pity, for her daughter, who wanted to understand why her own mother had turned into a witch. Pity, for her son, who wanted to believe he still lived in a happy family. Pity, for her husband, who worked like a dog for so little money. And pity for herself, for her shrunken dreams.

She picked up the book and continued to read to Pete.

“The king’s son climbed up to visit Rapunzel, but when he got near the top of the tower, instead of seeing the face of his beloved, he saw the wicked witch. The witch was angry with the prince for taking Rapunzel’s love, and so she pushed him to the ground. He landed on a bush of thorns. The bush softened the fall, but the thorns stung his eyes and blinded him. For many years, he wandered, unable to see the world around him.”

Jill felt she was describing her own life. She, too, was stumbling blindly through each day, just hoping to survive.

“Mummy, the story ends happily, doesn’t it?”

“Of course it does, dear. He finds Rapunzel; she weeps to see him in such a state, and when her tears fall into his eyes, they cure him. He can see the world clearly again, and they go back to his kingdom and live happily ever after.”

“That will happen to us when Daddy gets a new job.”

Guilt filled her. In a fit of shame, she attempted to discuss the matter with her own mother.

“I’m so angry all the time. You lied to me!”

“What are you talking about, Jill?”

She plunged on, even though she knew it was useless. “The trouble is, you brought me up to be a lady.”

“Well, I should hope so, dear.”

“But mother, one needs money to be a lady.”

“Oh, Jill, don’t start talking about money again. Being a lady is a state of mind. How are the children? Is the baby walking yet?”

“Mother, please listen to me. We can’t pay our mortgage. We’re going to have to sell the house. I don’t know what we’ll do then. The tension of it all is driving me mad. I do nothing but scream. I can’t accept it. I see all the greedy crooks doing well, and I feel like I’ve been conned by life.”

“You were always over-dramatic.”

“Have you heard a word I’ve said, Mother? We’ll probably have to sell our house. You brought me up with the wrong values. You told me to be sweet, to dress nicely, and to be polite. Why didn’t you teach me how to stretch money in ten different ways? Why didn’t you teach me how to lie and cheat? Why didn’t you teach me the realities of life!” she screamed down the phone.

“I brought you up correctly. How you choose to live now is your business. If your husband wants to be a gardener, that’s his choice. What do you expect of me?”

“Help! Sympathy!” She hung up.

“Fat lot of good that does,” she told eleven-month-old Rosie, who was crying for her lunch. “I’ll only have to phone tonight and apologize.”

“There was a little girl, and she had a little curl,” she crooned to Rosie as she fed her. “Right in the middle of her forehead.” She curled her daughter’s hair in the appropriate place as she sang. “And when she was good, she was very, very good, and when she was bad, she was horrid. And so, she was unloved and unlovable.”

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“Why don’t you ask your bloody rich Uncle Mark to help?” Jack asked one evening.

Once the idea had been spoken out loud, it assumed a tangible existence of its own. The forbidden had been mentioned: charity.

“We could make it a business deal, not a handout,” Jack said.

She was reluctant. Somehow, this felt like the last stand in their fight to remain "middle-class." But then she thought of how much she wanted clothes for the children, a washing machine that worked, money for the mortgage. Finally, she wanted them enough to beg.

"I'll send an email today," she announced at breakfast.

"Not an email," Jack said. "May end up in junk. Write a letter, and send it registered mail, so we can be sure he gets it. And remember, the worst thing that can happen is he'll refuse us."

"Put so succinctly, I wonder why I ever had any qualms," she answered dryly.

She wrote the letter in trepidation. She tried to make it clear she wasn't asking for charity. The whole matter would be conducted in a business-like manner. They'd repay the loan, and he wouldn't lose on it. They were even prepared to put the deeds of the house in his name for added security. She posted the letter by registered mail and spent the next three weeks awaiting a reply.

The atmosphere of the house changed. Hope began, quietly, to steal back into their home. The air of possibility increased each day. It was bad luck that Jack had lost his job, but it was only because of the recession. He'd find another job, and the bitterness and hardship would ebb. It would become a distant memory.

"Who knows? In time, we may even come to see this period of our lives as character building," she said almost cheerfully one morning.

"Don't go too far," Jack warned her. "We both know that deprivation doesn't build anything except a good, solid argument."

Occasionally, one of them would stop and say: "You don't think he'll refuse, do you?"

"Of course not. He's so rich it's just a drop in the ocean to him."

"Well, it's a bloody great lake for us."

Although she'd been anxiously searching for it every day, when the letter arrived, it was a shock. The minute she took the envelope in her hands, she knew – it was a refusal. "This is stupid," she thought. "I haven't even opened it. How can I know?"

But she did know. She sat watching the children watch TV. Finally, she took a deep breath, and opened the letter with trembling fingers.

A curt letter. Typed. Unsigned.

Shame washed over her.

How stupid to imagine he would understand and sympathize? He assumed he was being taken advantage of – poor relations begging from the rich one.

She sat looking at the letter, waiting for despair to hit her. Instead, a light came on and lit the dark places that had filled her soul for so many months. Somewhere between reading the letter and feeling humiliated, a revelation had occurred. They didn't need a helping hand. Her fury, fear, and frustration didn't disappear, but the shadow they had cast was lifted, and something else appeared.

Determination.

They were young and strong; they'd get through this. She picked up the baby and started to sing.

"Hush little baby, don't you cry. Mama's got the strength to get us by."