

The Princess Who Asked Many Questions

Once upon a time there lived a princess who asked a great many questions. Why is this and why is that? What is this for and where does that road lead to? Again and again her father, the King, explained to her that as she was a girl she was not supposed to ask questions, only to be good to her mother and to learn to sew.

The princess was not at all happy with this and vowed to herself that she would find the answers to her questions come what may. But who would be her guide? She sought help from the wise men of the court, but they merely repeated what the King had said, warning her that it was well known that the female brain was smaller than that of the male and, thus, was not designed for serious thought. She tried speaking to the Archbishop but he dismissed her enquiries with a sweep of his hand and told her that if God had intended women to think He would not have made them so short. The princess was furious and ran out of the chapel, slamming the great wooden doors behind her

Day after day, week after week and month after month, the princess struggled to find the answers to her questions until, at last, one afternoon early in May she found herself sitting upon a bench in the gardens of the palace, her head in her hands and tears pouring from her eyes. She wept and she wept until the tears had made a pool on the ground beside her.

Suddenly she heard a voice: “if you do not stop crying,” said the voice, “I may have to move.”

Looking up, the princess saw before her, curled upon the edge of the flower bed, a cat, her head resting on her paws and her eyes, half open, watching the slowly encroaching waters. “I am so sorry,” said the princess, and immediately took out her handkerchief and began to mop up the little puddle. “It is of no real importance,” said the cat, “but this is the warmest spot in the garden at this time of day and I would prefer to be able to stay here until the sun moves behind the tower of the chapel, when I shall have to make my way to the kitchen for supper.”

“I won’t cry any more,” said the princess, who had never before had a conversation with a cat, “but perhaps, if you don’t mind, I could stay here with you – until, that is, the sun moves behind the tower of the chapel, and you have to make your way to the kitchen for supper.” “I should be pleased to have your company,” said the cat, “although you do seem to be rather distressed.”

Quite forgetting that she was speaking to a cat, the princess began to unburden herself, telling the cat all about the things that she wanted to know

and about her wish that someone would help her find the answers to her many questions. When she had finished, the cat tucked her paws beneath her chest and lifted her head to catch the last remaining rays of sunlight. The soft fur of her throat was the colour of banana mouse.

“I have found,” said the cat, “that the trouble with questions is that they are so very distracting. They make my head feel quite dizzy. The most important thing is to be in place.” And as the last beam of sunlight left the garden and disappeared behind the tower of the chapel, the cat stood up, stretched and began to walk towards the palace kitchen.

As the princess returned to her chamber, she could think of nothing but the cat. And the more she thought the more she remembered how the cat had been in that particular warm spot in the garden at that particular time of the day, how well placed she had been to catch the rays of the sunshine and how she had left the garden as soon as the sun had moved behind the tower of the chapel.

As she entered her room, the evening sun passed through her window and rested upon a chair beside her dressing table. Now, without thinking, she sat down upon the chair and enjoyed the gentle warmth of the evening light. She felt strangely calm and, for once, had forgotten all the questions that ran around her head. Undisturbed, she sat there until the last of the sunlight left her chamber.

*

The next day, in the afternoon, she returned excitedly to the garden. But the cat was not there. Nor the next day, nor the next. The princess began to wonder whether, perhaps, she had imagined her conversation. And, after a while, her questions returned to taunt her. But, in the evenings, she would return to her room and sit upon the chair by her dressing table, and here, for a few moments, as she felt the sun warm upon her skin, she remembered the words of the cat. And as she did so, the questions would subside and the strange feeling of calm returned to her.

*

Some weeks passed and, in sorrow, the princess was now convinced that it had all been a dream. One morning, her mother, the Queen, asked if she would go to the great walled vegetable garden of the palace and collect some herbs that she needed for a nosegay. It was a beautiful, still, morning and the princess was glad to get out of the palace. She took a small basket and a pair

of scissors and set off on her task. She entered the garden through the gates decorated with leaves and pineapples. It was a beautiful garden and the princess walked along the gravel paths, each one covered with vines and clematis that spread themselves over the rows of arches that spanned the paths. Stopping here and there to look at the vegetables, she noticed the early potatoes, the garlic, the spinach and the broad beans. Then, just as she turned towards the bed of herbs, she saw, between two rhubarb pots, the cat, lying upon its side, its back leaning against the warm wall of the garden.

The princess was so excited that her words tumbled forth like bubbles from the neck of a champagne bottle. “Where have you been, and why have you not come back to the garden? You are not really a dream are you and where do you go when you are not here?” The questions followed one upon another until the princess felt quite exhausted.

This time the cat said nothing but, with her eyes closed, remained very still, the soft oatmeal fur of her belly gently rising and falling to receive the warmth of the morning sun. The sight of the cat and her slow and gentle breath eventually calmed the princess who stopped talking, sat down upon the path, lifted her face towards the clear blue sky and closed her eyes, feeling the gentle warmth of the sun as she breathed in and out.

Suddenly, she shivered and when she opened her eyes she realised that the sun had passed behind the canopy of the great horse chestnut tree that stood in one corner of the garden, and which now cast its shadow over her. She stood and turned to the cat, but the cat was nowhere to be seen. Again, she wondered whether she had imagined it but there, on the ground, between the rhubarb pots and close to the wall, was the indentation left by the cat’s body. And when she knelt down and placed her hand upon it, it was still warm. She picked up her basket and scissors and went straight away to the herb beds to gather the herbs for her mother’s nosegay.

That evening, when she came to her room and found herself once more sitting on the chair by her dressing table, enjoying the evening sunlight, the rhythmic breathing of the cat, and the gentle rise and fall of her oatmeal belly, returned to her mind. She began to notice her own breath. She watched it come in and go out, and come in and go out again. She felt the rise and fall of her own belly and noticed how her chest opened to take in the breath and how it contracted as the breath left her. On the in breath she felt still and on the out breath she felt calm.

And so she sat there, undisturbed, until the sunlight left her room.

*

For the rest of the year that followed, the princess and the cat met on many occasions but always by surprise. Sometimes the cat would be there and sometimes she would not. Sometimes the princess would see the cat sitting erect upon the top of a distant wall. And sometimes, when she turned a corner, the cat would be right there. The princess learnt much from the cat. She learnt about patience and about attentiveness, and she came to notice the cycles of the moon and the changing seasons. She learnt where to shelter from the draught of the wind and how to listen for the sound of mice. On some evenings, in the depth of winter, when it was especially cold outside and when the snow and rain battered against her window, she would find the cat, curled into a ball, asleep upon a cushion by the fire in her room and, together, they would rest upon their breath.

And although the questions never went away, they began to behave themselves. The princess would reflect upon one question at a time, returning to the rhythm of her breath whenever she felt lost. And if she could not find all the answers, it seemed to her that questions that had once been overwhelming and fearful now seemed at least manageable. And some just went away. She came to look forward to her evenings in her room and it was soon understood by the rest of the household that this was her time and that she was not to be disturbed.

Indeed, on several occasions when the King was perplexed about what he should do, the princess was able to make a number of quite useful suggestions. Noticing this, the King said, "I hope that you have not been worrying my wise men or my Archbishop with your endless enquiries." "No," said the princess, "but I have spent time with a cat." "Well," said the King dismissively, "I don't think anyone could learn much from a cat!"

David Cadman, *The Hamlet House*, Winter 1999

Not to be published without the author's consent