



A Book at Bedtime

Tom tucked his grand-daughter Cassie into bed on Christmas night, pressed a kiss to her forehead and reached to turn out the light.

"No grandpa! I want a story!"
"Okay," he smiled, "but just one. I need to get home to bed as well."

"Three!"

He sighed and sat down on the bed.

"Maybe if they're short, we'll see."

He plucked a book from the shelf by her bed and opened it.

"Oh, *Sleeping Beauty*. Do you like that one?"

Cassie pursed her lips in thought.

"Is that the one where the princess goes to sleep for years'n'years'n'years, and the prince cuts through the forest and wakes her with a kiss?"

"Somebody knows it well! Shall we read that one?"

Cassie looked at him pityingly. "Oh no grandpa, we can't read that one."

"Oh? Why not?"

"Mummy says the prince shouldn't kiss her when she's sleeping. She says it's set school salt."

"Set school... ah, I see."

"Yes. Mummy says *Sleeping Beauty* should jump up and shout 'No!' and push him away. And if he tries it on again, she should kick him inna fork."

Tom winced and reflexively crossed his legs. That'd certainly be a pointed lesson to the prince not to go kissing strange women without their permission.

"Okaaaaay ... no *Sleeping Beauty*." He flipped over a few pages. "What about *Snow White*?"

"Oh, grandpa," said Cassie accusingly. "Mummy says that's worse than *Sleeping Beauty*. She says the prince

kisses *Snow White* when she's dead! Mummy says that's necker filly." Cassie leaned over and confided, "I thought that was one of the girl horses from *My Little Pony*, but Mummy says no, it's a Very Bad Thing."

Tom tried to come up with a response to that. *Nope, got nothing*. He flipped more pages.

"What about *Little Red Riding Hood*? Do we like that one?"

Cassie brightened. "I don't think I know that one, grandpa. Yes, let's read that one!"

Tom breathed a sigh of relief and began. About five minutes in, and *Red Riding Hood* was lost in the forest,

Cassie looked confused.

"Why didn't she use Google maps, grandpa?"

"Well she didn't have a phone, sweetheart."

"Ohhhh. Had she been naughty? Mummy always says she'll take away my phone if I'm naughty."

"No Cassie, she'd never had a phone."

"Oh wow! She must've been really naughty growing up!"

"Um, no, nobody had phones then. They hadn't been invented. All they had were paper maps."

Cassie gave this some thought.

"So why didn't her mummy give her a paper map before she sent her into the forest?"

"Well ... I don't know."

Cassie frowned. "She sounds like a bad mummy. I think somebody should report her."

"Ye-e-es, maybe we'll forget about *Red Riding Hood* till you're a little bit older."

He opened the book at random farther on.

Rumpelstiltskin? He ran

through it in his head ... seemed safe enough. Well, he'd give it a go.



"... and the Queen had to guess *Rumpelstiltskin*'s name, so what do you think she did?"

"Ask Alexa!"

"I'm sorry, I didn't understand that question."

Tom rolled his eyes as the Amazon speaker chimed in.

"Cassie, sweetheart, they didn't have an Alexa."

"I'm sorry, I didn't understand that question."

Tom gritted his teeth.

"They didn't have ... one of those things."

"What, an Alexa?" asked Cassie mischievously.

"I'm sorry, I didn't understand that question."

"Cassie!" he scolded.

"Sorry grandpa," she grinned, clearly not in the least sorry.

"Okay, then why didn't she try Wikipedia?"

"Because they didn't have that back then either."

"So how did she find out his name, grandpa?"

"Well, she followed him into the forest one night, and found him singing a song about his name."

"No." Cassie shook her head emphatically.

"What do you mean, no?"

"Rumpel-whatsit doesn't rhyme with anything. He couldn't have been singing it. Unless he was rapping?"

"No, see the song went 'the queen will never win the game, for *Rumpelstiltskin* is my name'."

"Ohhhh. Then it was a bit silly

of him to go singing it like that, wasn't it?"

"Well he thought no-one would be listening."

"I'm not surprised. It's a pretty awful song. But can we listen to it anyway, grandpa? Is it on Spotify?"

"Erm, no."

"Huh. I told you it was really bad."



Tom continued flipping through the story book. *The Red Shoes* ...uh-huh. Cuts off her own feet because they won't stop dancing. Never see that on *Strictly*, do you? *Hansel and Gretel*, cannibalism and murder, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, mass murder, *The Tinder Box*, murder, kidnap ... he turned some more pages ... oh, and more murder, hurrah, *The Little Match Girl*, frozen to death in an alley

"What's wrong, grandpa? Why aren't you reading?"

"Just trying to find a nice story, sweetheart," he said brightly, flipping pages like mad. "Here we are! What about *Cinderella*?" He watched her face fall. *Oh for pity's sake, what now?*

"No, grandpa," said Cassie firmly. "Mummy says that's modern slaving."

Of course she does. Tom often wondered what his daughter-in-law's childhood had been like. He envisaged her father perched on her bed, reading aloud from a self-penned treatise on *An Analysis of 18th and 19th Century Folklore As Viewed Through the Lens of Modern Societal Norms*. Well it probably sent her to sleep, so there was that.

He closed the book.

"No Grandpa!!" wailed Cassie. "Not yet! I'm not sleepy yet!"

"It's okay, sweetie. I'm going to make up a special story instead, just for you."

"Yaaaay!!" Cassie nestled into the pillows and gazed up at him with rapt attention.



"Once upon a time, there was a princess called Cassandra."

"That's my name!" Cassie looked thrilled for a moment, and

then paused. "Oh. I s'pose she had 'long golden hair and skin as white as snow'," she quoted witheringly.

"Not at all. *This* Cassandra had beautiful brown curls the colour of milk chocolate, and -" he tapped her nose, "- freckles all over her charming little nose."

"Hmmm." Cassie was mollified up to a point, but having heard too many tales of golden-haired princesses who largely lived in jeopardy and waited passively for rescue ...

"And was she scared of her own shadow, grandpa?"

"Nope, only of spiders."

Cassie nodded happily. That was a thoroughly sensible thing to be scared of.

"Now Cassandra's kingdom was quite poor, and her people didn't have all the necessities of life."

"Like broadband?" asked Cassie.

"Not quite where I was going with it, but yes, that too. And this made Cassandra sad, because she didn't know how to help them. But one day, it was announced that a very rich man was coming to visit the kingdom, and if he was impressed with them all, he might give them bucketfuls of money."

"Ooooh, I bet they were all on their very best behaviour!"

"They were. Everybody lined up in their best clothes, with their hair brushed, and cheered when he arrived."

"Did he give them the money?"

"Patience, Cassie, let me tell the story."

"Sorry grandpa."

"So the man and all his hangers-on made their way to the palace gates where Cassandra and her parents were waiting. And there was an old lady by the gates, who stepped forward.

"Please sir', she said. 'Could you spare some coins? My children are starving'."

"Oh, that's sad," said Cassie.

"Yes, it was, but the man just pushed her to the ground and said, 'Get out of my way!'"

"What a mean man!"

"Cassandra thought so too, because she walked straight past the man and went to help the old lady. The man was furious that Cassandra was ignoring him,

and he said none of them deserved a penny of his money, and he turned around and went away."

"No!"

"Ah, but wait. The old lady smiled at Cassandra and said, 'Thank you, my dear. Always remember that it's nice to be important, but it's much more important to be nice'. And with that, she transformed into a fairy godmother!"

"No!"

"Yes she did. And she bestowed all kinds of riches on Cassandra and her people."

"Like broadband?"

"Yes Cassie, like broadband.

Everybody got a fibre connection and free WiFi," he joked.

"Oh good," she said seriously. "And did they all live happily ever after?"

"All except the rich man.

While he was on his way home, a rabbit ran out and scared his horse, and it bolted into the forest, where he bumped into a wasp's nest, and they swarmed all over him, so he jumped in a lake to make them go away and stop stinging him, and a big fish bit his bottom."

Cassie laughed and clapped her hands.



Tom tucked the covers around her again and kissed her cheek.

"There we are then, time for you to go to sleep. So did you have a lovely Christmas Day, Cassie? I'm sorry I missed dinner with the rest of the family."

"Oh yes, grandpa. I had some t'rific presents, and dinner was really good." She chewed her lip. "But Mummy gave me a bit of a telling off after everybody went home."

Tom sighed. "What did you do, Cassie?"

"It wasn't my fault, grandpa!" she protested. "I was watching Auntie Mary really, really carefully when we had dinner, and she got annoyed and she asked me why I was staring at her so much, and I said Mummy said she drinks like a fish, and I wanted to see how she did it."