

## Three Princesses

Robert Reed

The princess looked as if she began each day strapped into an electric chair, measured jolts of current working every taut muscle. Her hair was shiny-bright and too thick to lie flat and, for the moment at least, the color of sunburned wheat. I couldn't pinpoint her age, but flocks of pale, elaborately shaped blotches rode her forearms—ghostly remnants of the holographic tattoos popular twenty-five years ago. A fair amount of cosmetic surgery and neurotoxins were on display. The current trend is for women with money to have their features stiffened into a permanent rigor. In some circles, even sweet young girls gladly disappeared beneath the polished, plastic beauty found on a much-loved doll. This particular lady had paid for a lovely Nordic veneer, complete with the radiant, unrelenting smile. But the boob job was what I noticed most. Whatever nature gave this woman had been cut off and tossed into the trash. What replaced it were synthetic tissues and cultured tissues and maybe some wondrous new muscles. I glanced back at her, and for a magical moment, there was no one else in the world. She was a captivating stranger standing behind me, wearing shorts and sandals and a tight summer sweater. Admiring her cleavage didn't feel rude. Why else would she dress this way, if not to get admired? Then I noticed the man standing at her side, and of course he took note of my interest. But he wasn't a jealous sort. If anything, he was proud of his companion, one hand and then the other touching this gorgeous, contrived creature, answering my testosterone stare with an "Aren't you jealous?" wink.

The couple had just joined us in line. I'd heard them chatting amiably, and when I turned forward again, they plunged into another long, vacuous conversation. Casual acquaintances out on a preliminary date, I assumed. Married people don't ramble in a breezy, never-stop fashion, and long-term daters would have possessed more focus. I remained aware of their noise more than their words, right up until that moment when the man mentioned being famished. Since I was hungry too, I lifted my focus. They talked casually about food, listing delights and disgusts. Her voice was doctored as much as her body, sounding too girlish to be real. They chatted about recipes and restaurants. Then the woman confessed that her favorite restaurant in the habitable world was within walking distance, which prompted her date to whisper something about something, which caused her to respond with an odd laugh that fell short of happy.

I was curious, to a point. But then Amy pulled on my arm, saying, "Come on, Dad. The line's moved."

For what seemed like ages, we had been rooted to the same slab of sidewalk. But now two full steps were achieved before we had to stop dead again.

Standing inside a grove of irrigated citrus trees was a crystal castle, and waiting in front of the castle gate was a very important princess greeting her loyal subjects with polite words and a monarchical nod of the head. A hunchbacked elf stood beside her, ready to help with minor needs. A beefier creature—some species of knight wearing golden armor and a helmet topped with eagle feathers—slowly patrolled the line, helping maintain a mood of serious happenings. Parents were in attendance, and a few brothers too young to be left wandering on their own. But girls predominated, each with her essentials at the ready: memory pads and pens, cameras and web-eyes, and, most important, the paraphernalia that could be embedded with technologies that were dubbed "magic."

Amy was carrying a treasured wand made of zirconium and brass spun around a spine of superconducting ceramics. Several years of savings had been dedicated for this glorious moment, and her shopping list included spells both popular and obscure—sophisticated neural enhancements, for the most part, that would give her new talents and lucid, edifying dreams.

Long ago, I made the mistake of mentioning, "It's an inventive way to market merchandise."

“It is not ‘merchandise’, Dad. These are spells.”

And only once, when I was extra stupid, did I refer to the objects of her affection as being monsters.

“They’re princesses,” Amy interrupted. She was seven at the time and quite fierce, with no patience for scoffers. “Don’t ever call them ‘monsters’, Dad. Never, ever!”

The Orianas were favorites for millions of young women. They belonged to a trademarked line of cloned, totipotent cells, the proud property of Born-bright, which happened to be the oldest and largest biomanipulation corporation. And despite one father’s primitive complaints, they were gorgeous, astonishing pieces of work. Even from a distance, today’s Oriana was lovely. It wasn’t just her physical beauty, which was considerable, or the long black and emerald gown that no one else could wear half as well. Or even the natural ease with which the princess handled her various admirers. It was also the story that lay behind her and every last one of her identical sisters.

When Amy was born, a rich aunt gave us the full collection of Oriana books, and soon they became our favorite time-for-bed spell. When she was three, my daughter began immersing herself in the assorted holos and interactive games that taught her the basics of reading and math. By the time Amy was five, I knew Oriana’s life story better than I knew most of my friends’. The red-haired princess was just a baby when her mother died. Her king-father stood at the helm of a great nation, but he was an inadequate leader and an emotionally distant patriarch. And as so often happens in these tales, there were stepmother troubles. The new wife was younger than her husband, beautiful and vain, and very much the fool. Using her wiles, the queen steered the nation down dangerous paths, all while making the innocent suffer. Yet despite having no mother and precious little love, the red-haired princess grew up plucky and strong. Oriana’s story was full of wise peasants and charming adventurers. But here was where the parent company did something truly new: Every princess that crawled out of its birth chamber was genuine. While the manufactured cells were dividing and spreading across a standardized skeleton, an AI program that believed it was a young girl grew up inside a magical kingdom. Every Oriana spent her formative years battling dragons and evil wizards as well as her father’s ill-tempered wife. No two princesses lived an identical adventure. Many didn’t survive their own stories. Their world held real dangers, disasters were final, and only the cleverest, bravest souls managed to reach the story’s end . . . at which time their programs were implanted into physical bodies whose calling it was to stand in public, shilling wares for their smiling, joyful owners.

Oriana’s gown was long and sleek, black in the body with dark green frills and a tidy cape that could double as a hood in case of rain or dragon shit. Her tiara was a combination of cultured gems and security sensors. A long diamond wand stood between her and the elf, patiently balancing on its three legs, and when the next young worshiper bowed and offered the usual words of thanks, the princess lifted her tool to give the girl’s shoulder a light, respectful touch—a gesture that transferred one or many corporate products into the customer’s possession.

This Oriana’s voice wasn’t like the others I’d heard before. It was rougher, and deeper. When the line crept forward again, that voice greeted the next young ladies with a regal elegance. I couldn’t make out her words, but the sound of them carried, bringing a sense of life and hard adventure that couldn’t help but impress.

Just then, Amy glanced at me. Perhaps she thought I was bored, because she gave my arm another pull, saying, “Thanks for bringing me.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You’re making me happy,” she promised.

“I know,” I replied smartly

Meanwhile, the couple behind us continued with their elaborate courtship ritual. The woman listed more favorite corners in this park/mall/sanctuary/farm. But her man friend seemed most interested in the big picture. Pointing at the sky, he reminded everyone in earshot that the white wet clouds were Brightborn’s doing. “Where else is it going to rain tonight?” he asked.

Nowhere close to us, I guessed. This end of the state hadn’t enjoyed real moisture this year.

Then, in a quieter voice, he mentioned his own investments in this wondrous corporation—investments that had brought splitting stocks and reliably huge dividends. “What other business does half as well?” he asked, working hard to impress his well moneyed date.

She made an agreeable sound.

Then with a bright cackle, he threw out that clichéd motto, “Bornbright is our future.”

Maybe so, but our tomorrows were going to be jammed with old-fashioned flourishes. There was the castle, for instance, and the stone-inlaid sidewalk curling around the edge of an old-style iron fence. And between the fence and castle lay the quiet green moat. Pointing at the thick water, he said with authority, “They make everything work here. There might be ten species of tilapia thriving there.”

“I like tilapia,” said the hungry woman.

“See how odd it looks? The water, I mean. It’s one of the new algae. Very productive, and it can’t grow anywhere else in the world. Every new species is the same, you know. Each exists inside its own little puddle.”

At that point, a skeptical voice interrupted.

“We can certainly hope so,” I mentioned.

The woman realized that I was paying attention. She looked up at me, that changeless smile riding her doll face while the pale brown eyes tried to read my expression, my posture.

Her date decided on a preemptive attack.

“What do you mean?” he asked, his own face falling short of a smile. “You don’t sound like you believe it.”

What had been a pleasantly boring situation turned tense and a little bit fun. I was tempted to mention a few famous mistakes. I thought about explaining the isolation tricks used by the owners of these noble bugs—clever genetic manhandlings meant to keep control over their amazing, patented organisms. If pressed, I could have explained how those tricks often tricked us. It is amazing how many people, even people my age, can’t remember that the Great Lakes used to be blue in the summer or that the Gulf of Mexico didn’t suffer enormous fish kills whenever the hyperactive plankton stole all the free oxygen.

But that lecture would have embarrassed my daughter, who found my cynicism to be one of my more ugly features. So instead of honesty, I offered an unreadable grin. “Nothing. I didn’t mean anything.”

Amy rewarded me with suspicion and a thankful nod of her head.

I’m not the foolish, unapproachable king of a father. At least I try not to be. But like Oriana’s father, I am a widower who shares his castle with a strong-willed daughter. Twelve years ago, Amy’s mother

contracted a common cancer. Odds are, the disease came from the Black Christmas residues that lurk in everyone's water. The only mercy that I could find was that she died quickly, without too much pain. And ever since, I have worked hard to avoid all of the clichéd fairy tale pitfalls.

"It's a beautiful day," said the man to his date.

"A beautiful day," she agreed, but still eyeing me.

Then neither spoke for a moment, each probably wondering what portion of their prattle I would comment on next.

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In too many ways, our world runs parallel to Oriana's.

Which explains her fabulous success, I presume.

Like hers, this kingdom was once great and powerful. But then evil found us and consumed much of what was best in us. The only difference is that instead of dragons and evil wizards, our realm suffers from old diseases and new climates and, worst of all, a wealth of hatred. Twenty years ago, the Black Christmas arrived, and that horror turned into the Year of Measured Retribution. Ever since, the world's population has been plunging—a demographic event never predicted when I was a boy. Yet even if the humanity disappeared tonight, without fuss or new fireballs, the world would continue growing hotter and sicker. And our biosphere would keep mutating and wobbling, giving all the warning signs of an impending, Permian-style total collapse.

Today, my childhood home sits today beneath stale Gulf waters. Forty percent of the world's farmland is too poisonous to be cultivated, and half of what remains sits inside active war zones. Thick, sulfurous petroleum costs five hundred dollars a barrel, and you need a division of hardened Marines to deliver it from what's left of the Saudi Empire. And according to professional paranoids, at least two thousand political movements and groups of like-minded radicals possess the powers and dumb-assed will to hammer what remains of civilization.

Yet despite all the misery, we're managing surprisingly well. Our diminished numbers are an ugly blessing. Solar power and biomass fuels keep most of our lights burning, with daily brownouts and the occasional three-day darkness helping to remind us to be thrifty. With all the cancers and plagues, medical care has become cheap and efficient, if rather less able to deliver miracles. And there's a new space program on the way, the goal of the moment being a fleet of ten trillion smart-disks orbiting our equator as a tidy bright ring, throwing shade across our broiling lands while sending home rivers of clean and delicious microwave radiation.

I was trained as an ecologist, which means I can make any gloomy projection that I choose. But despite my black ramblings, I am reliably astonished by the successes produced by industry and the genius of my fellow scientists.

Bad as things look, they might not get all that much worse.

And if you think about the twisting course of history, that is pretty much the standard human condition.

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Again our line moved forward a resolute two steps.

Once more, my daughter measured my patience, and, finding reserves, she rewarded me with a graceful

smile and appreciative wink.

“As soon as we’re done here,” she began.

I nodded.

“You get to choose what we do next.”

“Thanks, honey.”

In this sick world, I hadn’t managed too badly. I wasn’t the great scientist I’d hoped to become, but I had a reliable government job in the wild, wooly world of testing air and water quality. I could actually pay for our vacation and not acquire too much debt, managing a two-star hotel room and three daily meals of tilapia and algae cakes. “Why shouldn’t I feel smug and a little happy?” I might mutter under my breath. “These days, how many people can be the masterful provider to their family?”

“Where do you want to go next, Dad?”

A variety of destinations tugged at me.

“The Future? The Past?”

Brightborn’s empire included a county-sized slab of reconditioned land stretching out on all sides of us. Lesser amusement parks used holo tricks and immersion chambers to fool patrons, but the world’s most profitable company had thrown its billions in more impressive directions: Their park was dotted with crystal domes, each covering two or three square miles of tightly controlled environment. The Past had little worlds of mock-dinosaurs and mammoths and tidal pools jammed with trilobites. The Future had an alien city reminiscent of a hyperactive ant nest, and a star port on some thirtieth century moon, and beneath the largest dome, a colony of mock humans—Oriana’s less lovely cousins—fighting for survival in the lush purple jungles of Best Hope.

“Alpha Centauri?” Amy guessed.

I was tempted, if only to see how the corporate minds had conjured up a wilderness world known only through telescopes and conjecture. “Best Hope is a long ride from here,” I mentioned.

“You want to stay in the Kingdom?”

“For now,” I allowed. After all, we had several more days to absorb the various wonders.

Again, our line shuffled moved.

Slightly.

I counted a dozen girls waiting to meet Oriana. Some were older than mine, and most were younger. The air of expectancy was palpable and pleasant. I laughed when I noticed one young lady leaping up and down—a five-year-old in her own black-and-green princess garb, her body threatening to burst into flame from her runaway excitement.

That’s when something obvious finally occurred to me.

The couple behind us was talking again. Quietly. I couldn’t help but turn and look at them, taking their measure.

Her measure.

Nobody else was standing with them. Maybe I'd imagined that one or the other had a teenage daughter who would eventually come meet them, and they were here because somebody wanted to be an indulgent parent, holding the absent girl's place in line. But no daughter had appeared, which made me curious. And when I'm curious, I ask questions. This trait used to drive my wife crazy. But most of the good in my life has come from these impulsive queries—including meeting my daughter's mother in the first place, I used to point out.

Looking back on that moment, I can't believe that I missed anything obvious. Because nothing was obvious. One moment, the couple was chatting about the blandest of subjects—an immersion mystery game, I think—and when they paused, I used my most reasonable voice to inquire:

“So, what brings you two to stand here?”

The man bristled, throwing a hard, accusing stare my way.

Maybe he thought I was flirting. Maybe I was flirting, who knows? But when his hand dropped on her shoulder, she leaned into him, as if requiring his strength to hold her upright. Her doll face was quite pretty and rigid, the smile unable to falter; but despite the limitations of that reconditioned flesh, a genuine expression surfaced. In the eyes, I saw something that I took for embarrassment. Then another emotion leaked forth. From her tight mouth and grimacing jaw muscles, I noticed a harsh and sad sensibility, old but not yet diluted by time. I couldn't tell for sure what I was seeing. But then the poor woman dipped her head, muttering, “My girl lives with Oriana.”

I fumbled for words.

Then her embarrassment returned, thick but not close to matching my own. “It's crazy, I know,” she admitted.

“No, it isn't,” I should have said.

But instead of lying, I said nothing, sighing and nodding while trying for a look of sympathy. Then I turned away from the grieving mother, and Amy shot me a withering look that couldn't, despite all its fury, make me feel any more awful than I felt already.

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My wife was an incurable optimist. She liked to claim that things weren't that abysmal. People in Medieval days had harder, briefer existences, and we were still living fatter lives than most kings of old. After Amy was born, but in those few months before the cancer took shape, the new mother returned home from an estate sale carrying a stack of ancient children's books. Later, when I was left alone to read to the motherless girl, I discovered that the lore of the princesses had changed considerably during these last decades.

Long ago, princesses wore pink and blue, and they were pretty in a delicate hothouse fashion, and their appeal stemmed from the youthful naivety coupled with a goodness that couldn't help but defeat all foes. There was always one true villain in their story. Not a dragon, which is just a beast and only following its own irritable nature. Not a troll or wolf or any mindless storm. The villain needed to be human, or at least some entity with recognizable human features. And the princess's nemesis was dark and smart, furious and greedy. When I read those old stories, I noticed that my affections often latched hold of the evil wizards and scheming witches.

For me, the lady villains were particularly intriguing.

They were usually drawn with stark but strangely lovely faces, long bodies, and a genius for moody wardrobes. And their concerns were usually petty and undeniable human: What woman doesn't look at herself in the mirror, fearfully watching for the fading of her youth and beauty and, with that, the loss of one kind of power?

Most fetching about those bitter stepmothers and witches was their unsentimental honesty. How many times did the woman in black tell that silly, doe-eyed princess, "My sweetness, life is full of difficult choices?"

Or, "Most stories end badly, my dear."

Or, "True love doesn't win out in the end. And oftentimes it doesn't even make it halfway down the road."

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Despite my blunder, I didn't abandon the Oriana line, nor did the couple standing behind us. And because of the circumstances, I had plenty of time to consider what an idiot I had been. I should have seen the obvious: Naturally the woman's favorite restaurant was within walking distance. She probably came here on a regular basis. Not that her daughter actually lived with Oriana, but that was the current shorthand in a world that knew death too well.

Everybody was sorry. But I stopped looking back at the woman, and, working together, we developed a chilled and respectful distance.

The line crept forward.

Girls met the great princess with curtsies and blubbing words.

My almost fourteen-year-old princess began to shiver with excitement, and when we crossed onto the wooden drawbridge, she broke out into her own subdued but genuinely excited little dance.

A school of fat fish pushed through the viscous green water.

Identical twins were speaking to Oriana. One little girl wanted to learn the princess's native language—a contrived and supposedly lovely tongue taught through a sophisticated AI wizard. Her sister had a shopping list of little spells that would help the next time she immersed herself in Obelisks and Dragons. Once those transactions were finished, the girls spent a few moments posing in front of hummingbird cameras, then with a voice both smooth and smart, Oriana wished both of her new friends a thoroughly wonderful day.

And suddenly, it was Amy's turn.

My daughter still has the face she was born with—a tidy, honest compilation of features borrowed from both parents. I like to believe that she is pretty, although her own estimate of her appearance is less charitable. But I don't know anyone, female or otherwise, whose smile is half as radiant as hers.

She bowed before the princess.

With the grace that flowed with her thick inhuman blood, Oriana dipped her head and offered a smile. Up close, the creature was undeniably beautiful. More than once, I have heard that the face began as a compilation of two hundred beautiful women. But no two Orianas swim out of the birth chamber with identical features. Her red hair was rich and long, tied into a no-nonsense bun in back and topped with that tidy, watchful tiara. The hands were tiny but strong in appearance, like those of a retired gymnast.

Something here smelled good and sweet—the princess, or maybe the hunchback standing at attention beside her. The black-and-green gown made a pleasant crinkling sound when she moved. I couldn't help but study the body beneath that tight-fitting fabric. The rumor is that the first-generation princesses had the bodies of young women. But that made them ripe targets for theft and sexual abuse from corporate employees. That's why this creature didn't have any nipples riding on her small breasts or any useful orifices below the waist. Food and drink were delivered by intravenous means, and when the park slept, the dark crimson blood was scrubbed clean of every metabolic waste.

Following rituals written by corporate masterminds as well as countless little girls, the princess did her vital business. A fat portion of our morning had been invested for what turned out to be three minutes of conversation and commerce. An autograph was granted. That rough warm voice said, "Thank you," and "You are too kind." Then the diamond wand touched Amy's zirconium wand, and my girl took a quick thousand photos of her standing beside Oriana. That was the moment when I finally, finally noticed something else that was obvious. When the creature moved slightly, I looked down at her crystal shoes, and genuinely astonished, I realized that one of her feet was made of wood.

This wasn't a manufacturing flaw, I understood. What must have happened was that when the young princess was a package of software living inside a mythical world, there was an accident. Maybe the Dragon of Meme ate that foot. Or a troll's sword hacked it off during the Forest Green episode. Or maybe a runaway cart had smashed it, or an innocent scratch grew infected. Without asking Oriana, there was no way to know. And for that morning at least, I was finished trying to ask my bold little questions.

But I did stare at that piece of polished oak.

And for a brief moment, the pretty green eyes made their assessment of this cranky old man.

I feel peculiar now, admitting that I was impressed.

Enthralled, even.

The creature before me had suffered mightily. But she retained her poise and charm, measuring my nature before a voice that was deeper and sharper than you would expect from royalty—or from a corporate symbol, for that matter—asked me, "Is there anything that I might do for you, good sir?"

I hadn't expected this.

"What?" I sputtered. Then before I could even consider the question, I said, "No, thank you. No, I'm fine."

But Oriana knew better. When I looked at her eyes again, I saw skepticism and hard-earned wisdom. I was reminded of those old princess stories that my wife had uncovered, but not of the sweet, fortunate girls whose lives were dependent on handsome young males and loving dwarves. Instead, I saw those stepmothers and tough-minded queens who knew the world exactly for what it was.

The princess offered me a smile.

Then, for no price at all, she gave me some sage advice.

"Enjoy today," she told me, with a tone mixing menace and optimism. Then with a warm dry and very strong hand, she touched me on the elbow, gently ushering me aside.

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I've heard it said, "Someday, we'll all live this way."

As the Earth grows sicker, humanity will need sanctuaries. There might come a day when our frail bodies have to be thrown aside, and by elaborate means, our souls will retreat into a virtual realm that mirrors what is real. And when the world becomes inhabitable again, our original bodies will be regrown in sterile diamond tanks, and our bravest souls will emerge again into the Land of the Real.

Of course ten or twenty breakthroughs would be required to make that kind of magic possible. It won't happen until long after I'm dust and ash, if it ever does. But there are some simpler tricks today, and with enough money, a few of us can outrace Death's reach.

Quietly, Amy and I moved out of the way, allowing the next loyal subjects to approach.

The woman with the constant smile came forward and bent low, lower than anyone else had, and whispered a few joyous words.

I couldn't make out their meaning, but they did end in a question mark.

"She's well," Oriana replied. "As a matter of fact, I spoke with her yesterday, my lady."

"I talked to her this morning," the grieving mother reported. Then she gave me the briefest glance, as if worried that I might laugh at her.

I would never.

The trickery that allowed a princess to live her adventures and then come out to walk among mortals . . . well, it wasn't long before people realized that the technology could be reversed. Brightborn didn't do the preliminary work, and to its credit, the company fought the concept for several years. It didn't want to become the provider of questionable magic, and no matter the profits, it feared the image of being overseers to some kind of high-tech Afterlife. But public interest was unrelenting, and finally, when competitors started expressing interest, the corporate masterminds gave in.

With enough money and enough warning, it was possible to make a rough copy of a dying person—a copy that would exist inside supercold servers presently buried beneath our feet.

Not knowing the story, I imagined a young girl dying of cancer. And now her sad mother was kneeling before a creature that had lived in both realms, handing up a little gift that would be taken into the castle and studied in full, then reproduced as a few billion lines of code.

I didn't see what the gift was.

By then, I was walking off with my daughter. I was telling Amy, "You pick. It's your day, so do whatever you want."

"I want to go to Alpha Centauri," she said.

Best Hope, it was.

Just as the princess told me to do, I took all the pleasure I could from that exceptionally wonderful day.

And three weeks later, an unknown group with a list of inarticulate desires set off a homemade nuke. The five-kiloton blast sprang from the clouds above the park, and several thousand tourists were killed instantly. Later, it was reported that every last Oriana had been lost, plus those underground servers where a multitude of unreal souls were busy living their days.

As always happens in tragedy, I grieved for the survivors as much as I grieved for the dead.

In particular, for one pretty woman trapped behind an eternal smile.