

Pickles and Ponies

a fairy-tale

LAURA MAY

Copyright © 2014 Laura May

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 1502435772

ISBN-13: 978-1502435774

CONTENTS

Prologue	1
Act 1: Happily Ever After	11
1 On Raising Imperfect Princesses	13
2 The Kingdom Clause	31
3 The Impracticalities of Immoderation	45
4 The Hokey Pokey	62
5 In Cod We Trust	71
6 The Cliff of Despair and the Way Round	86
7 Trouble in Not-Exactly-Paradise	98
8 Poking and Planking	111
9 A Romantic Encounter	124
Act 2: You Should Always Listen to your Horse	135
10 Under da Sea	137
11 A Certain Amount of Facial Hair	154
12 Another Clause	164
13 The Complications of Swimming and Dancing	172
14 A Montage	192

LAURA MAY

15	The Trials of an OEP	204
16	Conflations, Abrogations and Nations	217
17	Coup de Foudre	229
18	Amora and the Final Clause	242
	Epilogue	255
	Acknowledgements	259
	About the Author	263

DEDICATION

For my dear old hand-wrinkled Nan—your book, as
promised.

PROLOGUE

Once upon a time, in a land far away, a prince was in rather a pickle. Not a literal pickle, of course—prince-sized pickles are rather hard to come by. No, the type of pickle this prince was in was a thoroughly metaphorical one. To be honest, he might have preferred the vegetable.

It had all started a long time ago, really, when the prince was just a boy. He lived in the land of Raduga, where *everybody* was a prince or princess (until they became a king or queen), and so everybody had a palace. And every palace, naturally, had a big and beautiful palatial garden. This is where the young prince was playing when he first met Christina, who was of course royalty herself, and the daughter of the nearby King Andreas. Andreas was the King of Silverfish and Thimbles (hardly an exotic domain), and Christina stood to inherit this kingdom (hardly an exotic dowry). Nevertheless, the prince was lonely, and when he saw a girl wandering in the gardens, he just *had* to get a closer look.

Randolph, for that's our prince's name, crept closer and closer to the girl, darting from tree to tree, until he was so close he could have taken a cherry from her pocket—which is precisely what he tried to do. He clearly didn't

know that Christina was from the relatively bad king-bourhood of silverfish and thimbles, and had not only the fast reflexes of the silverfish she would one day rule, but a comprehensive amount of training in the self-defence art of Le Poke.

Just as Randolph was about to steal Christina's fruit, she scuttled sideways and dropped unexpectedly into a very unusual pose: half-crouched, one arm raised behind her head, and her front hand jutted out before her. Randolph was rather alarmed. "What on Raduga are you *doing?*" he asked.

"Stand back!" yelled Christina, "or I'll *Poke* you!"

"You can't do that!" exclaimed Randolph, haughtily. "I'm a *prince!*"

"Um, so's everyone who's not a princess. And I'm a princess, and I'm telling you, I *will* Poke you!"

Randolph considered Christina's threatening demeanour and decided to back-track. "How about we just play chasies instead?" he offered.

Slowly, and with a twist of suspicion, Christina lowered her arms and returned to a standing position. "Well," she said, "I guess that would be okay."

Years passed, as they do, and Randolph and Christina grew up. Randolph never shook his fascination with Christina's threat of Poking, and Christina never forgot that Randolph tried to steal her cherry. Nevertheless, they grew closer and closer as they got older, until suddenly, one day, they became Adults.

Becoming an Adult in Raduga isn't like growing up anywhere else. For a start, it's not something that you grow into: it's something that happens to you one day. There's a whole race of rather vindictive fairies in Raduga, who enjoy nothing so much as turning peoples' otherwise happy lives on their heads. One day, you might be having a lovely old time running through fields, learning new things, playing chasies with your friends and doing absolutely nothing in the sunshine, and the next thing you

PICKLES AND PONIES

know a cloud of gu-fairies is descending upon you and biting you all over. Nasty little things! Luckily, there's a Queen of Gu-Fairies, and she insists that her subjects let people know you've been bitten. It's not exactly an ideal situation, but at least that way you won't be stuck alone in a field for a few days.

And why should you be stuck alone in a field? Caterpillars were the first sign of the oncoming gu-fairy plague, and as everybody knows, when a caterpillar gets attacked by the gu-fairies, they go and hang off something high, take off their jacket to show their chrysalis, and cocoon for a few days before emerging as a beautiful butterfly. The process is somewhat similar for humans. Once you've been bitten, you'll crawl off to find the nearest high object, climb it, take off your clothes and hang upside-down for a good long time. After this time has passed, the transformation to Adult will be complete, and you'll be freed from stasis. Of course, unlike a butterfly, people don't have wings, and so you'll fall rather unceremoniously and be dumped on your head. For this reason, children in danger of imminent Adulthood are not allowed to play near cliffs, in case they accidentally hang from them following gu-bites. There were many unfortunate tragedies before that particular policy was implemented by the King of Not-Quite-Adults.

Being afflicted by Adulthood is considered almost a curse by residents of Raduga. Some people are lucky enough to never be bitten, though the majority are. Of course, not becoming an Adult doesn't mean you don't get older, and because almost everyone gets gu'd you'll have fewer and fewer people to play with.

Christina and Randolph were both playing in a sanctioned field together when the gu-fairies got them. They correspondingly crawled to a tree together, bleeding and hand in hand; climbed the trunk to an amenable branch; took off their clothes, and entered stasis. When, five days later, they thudded to the ground (one after the

other—thud! thud!), Randolph opened his eyes and saw Christina, Christina opened her eyes and saw Randolph, and they immediately declared that they were in love and would be together forever.

Inevitably, things turned out significantly more pickley than that. Still hand in hand (though with a short break to re-gather their clothes, being strangely embarrassed now that they were Adults), the pair meandered through the sanctioned field, strolled through the palace's outer gates, passed through the palatial courtyard, and entered the audience chamber. Randolph walked up to his father, the King of Quite Large Fish, and announced that he was now an Adult and entitled to marry Christina, Princess of Silverfish and Thimbles. Whereupon the King of Quite Large Fish, being a long-time Adult, practically-minded, and moreover somewhat of a sadist (after all, he *did* name his child Randolph) replied rather implacably, "Well, I'm afraid that's simply not going to happen. You're already betrothed."

"*Betrothed?!*" cried Randolph, incredulously. "Who gets *betrothed* now days?"

"Well," said the King, who was particularly partial to the word 'well', "apparently *you* do. Yes, you're betrothed to a princess who lives not far from here, the Princess of Really Rather Big Fish. It's an excellent match, and we were only awaiting your ascension to Adulthood to complete the affair. I'll send word to her parents immediately."

"*That's* 'simply not going to happen!'" retorted Randolph. "I'm going to marry Christina. We fell out of a tree, and we're in love. We're going to be together forever!"

"Very well," said the King. "Christina, if you could excuse my son and I, we're going to have a little chat."

Christina left, trying to make a good impression—though the King had known her for most of her life and that ship had *long* since sailed—and the King and his son

PICKLES AND PONIES

had a chat. The chat ranged up and down, here and there, but when you come right down to it, largely concerned Power and the Strategic Value of an alliance between the domains of Quite Large and Really Rather Big Fish. Randolph, now that he was an Adult, was much more interested in things like Power and Strategy than he had been as a child. Though his feelings for Christina were undiminished, he eventually conceded to meet the princess to whom he was betrothed.

Three days later, the other party to the betrothal arrived. Disappointingly (to Christina's eyes), she appeared to be a perfectly reasonable human being: she was polite, charming, honest, and not even ugly. Moreover, the union between the twin kingdoms of Quite Large and Really Rather Big Fish was a superb match. Christina wasn't concerned, though: the three days of waiting for the other princess to arrive had been spent with Randolph declaring his undying love (as princes are known to do), and she'd known him for long enough to know that he wouldn't break his word.

However, Christina hadn't been an Adult very long herself, and didn't know how serious the effects of the gu-fairy actually were. Thus, when a week after the princess' arrival, a silverfish scuttled into Christina's room to tell her that Randolph had chosen the other woman, she was more than surprised. She was even more than shocked. She was overtaken by what is commonly known as a Wave of Emotion, and much like a wave on the sea-shore, after it's passed, nothing remains the same. Christina's despair and suffering and rage were so powerful that when the Wave receded, she was an entirely new person.

Shortly afterward, Randolph arrived at Christina's door. She had been staying at his palace while waiting for their marriage (and for the other princess to go away), but now it was the last place in the world she wanted to be—and Randolph the last person she ever wanted to see.

"Hello," he said, with a tone of sheepishness. He

hadn't been an Adult long enough to know that sheepishness ought *never* to be used with a jilted woman.

Christina, facing the window with her back to him, didn't respond.

"Christina...?" he faltered. "I've come to tell you—"

"I know," she interrupted. "You've chosen *her* instead. But you love *me!* How *could* you?!"

"Well you see," said Randolph. "It's actually all rather sensible—"

"Sensible? *Sensible?! So* when we fell from a tree and you announced you'd love me forever, that wasn't '*sensible*' enough? I thought that *love* was something you sensed: but it seems that all you've a talent for sensing is Power."

Randolph stood there, not knowing quite what to say. "I'm... sorry?" he finally tried.

"You will be," threatened Christina. "For someone that is so good at sensing Power, you don't seem to sense mine: and Power I have." Suddenly, the shadows in the room started creeping from their allocated places and gathering behind Christina. From behind the curtains, from inside the fireplace, from under the desk and even from behind Randolph himself, the shadows crept and banded together, until finally Christina was outlined in a darkness as dark as the rest of the room was now unbearably bright. Randolph was so blinded by the shadow-less brightness of the room that he threw his hands up in front of his face, and could only listen as Christina continued in a whisper crackling with Power:

"Today, my *dearest* Randolph, you have demonstrated that love means nothing to you, that you are a man without a heart. And so I curse you: any child that comes of you and your new bride will be born as incapable of hearing his heart as you have been today. He will not feel friendship, happiness, nor love: he will feel nothing at all. Let us see how a *sensible* life can really be." And then, with the crackling snap of lightning, Christina was gone, and the shadows slunk back to their resting places.

PICKLES AND PONIES

Randolph was, somewhat ironically, heart-broken. He thought he'd been doing the right thing, and the last thing in the world he'd wanted to do was to hurt someone he cared for as much as he did Christina—but his father the king had explained that princes have duties, and that making this alliance work was one of them. Also, the Princess of Really Rather Big Fish wasn't even a little bit ugly. Either way, the hat Randolph had chosen to wear that day was one empowered with processes of logic and sensibility, and so he knew that he was making the right choice in the long run.

Wandering back to where his father and his new bride-to-be waited, Randolph pondered Christina's words. It all seemed a little far-fetched—but the shadows *had* moved, and Christina *had* disappeared, and who was he to doubt the magic flowing in Raduga? All the same, how could anyone possibly be born unable to hear their heart? How could someone even *be* without feelings? Would they still be people? Putting the possibly metaphysical ramifications to one side and listening to his Sensible Hat, Randolph decided not to tell anybody about the curse. After all, what if the princess decided not to marry him once she found out? All would have been lost for nothing.

A strangely coincidental eight months, three weeks, and six days later, Randolph's bride Lucia gave birth to a baby boy. He was normal-sized, with ten normal toes, ten normal fingers, two normal eyes, one normal mouth, an only slightly wonky nose, a voice box to terrify glass windows everywhere, and absolutely no heartbeat. The mid-wife was the first to discover it. She counted the normal fingers and normal toes, checked the normal eyes and normal mouth, measured the normal body, made note of the slightly wonky nose, winced against the sound of the voice box, then put her head against the baby's chest. She could hear the steady in-out of the child's even breaths; she could hear the gurgle-gurgle of the baby's mysterious insides; but as much as she listened, she couldn't hear the

beat of the child's heart.

Timorously, the midwife brought the baby to its parents. First Lucia listened, and then Randolph. Looking at her husband with exhausted but troubled eyes, Lucia waited for his reaction. "How can this be?" she asked. "Everybody has a heartbeat! How can he even be alive?"

Randolph sighed. "It's a curse," he replied. "I didn't think it was possible—it doesn't make any sense! But it's true: our son has a voiceless heart."

Lucia refused to accept this nonsensical statement, and so she sent word to her parents. They in turn sent word throughout their kingdom, and to the kingdoms of everyone who had any future interest in eating a really rather big fish (that is to say, to every king- and queendom in Raduga). All kinds of sage beings started to arrive at the palace to see the child. There were three vulture-people from the mountains, who recommended scavenging a new heart from somebody who needed it less than the baby prince. There was an alchemist from the Place of Stones, who tried to create a new heart by transmogrifying stones and monkey blood. There were doctors galore who said that the child wasn't alive at all, and the fact that he was waving his baby limbs around in a fairly normal baby way was some kind of black hocus pocus. Then there were the voiceless monks from the Place of Stolen Sound, who used interpretive dance to show that the boy's heart simply had no voice, and if they could restore its voice somehow, the princeling would be whole again. (It was, incidentally, quite a complicated dance, which went on for several days and utilised the skills of over one hundred interpretive dancing specialists.)

Finally, after the monks had ceased their dancing, a very little man approached the throne. He slunk up, with hands stuffed in patched pockets, his eyes trying to peer past his nose to the floor, his hair akimbo and (presumably unbeknownst to him) a family of sparrows in a nest on top of his faded backpack. Shyly, he cleared his throat, not

PICKLES AND PONIES

realising that everyone in the room was already staring at this strange apparition.

"Well," he said. "I don't know much about whether the child's alive or not, though he seems to be breathing. I certainly know nothing about turning rocks into hearts, or stealing organs from other people who need them. But I do know a little about restoring lost things. Perhaps I can help."

Randolph, who was already sick of the strange people who had been coming and going through the palace for the past several months, thought that this little man sounded no less crazy than those who had come before him—but Lucia, putting a hand on her husband's arm, asked the stranger to go on.

"I need a volunteer," said the little man. "The volunteer should have no voice of their own, and must be able to accompany the prince everywhere he goes. Most importantly, they should have been born on the same day and at the same hour as the prince. Bring me this volunteer, and I will restore to you the missing voice of the prince's heart."

Lucia, who was much less partial to the Sensible Hat than her husband was, thanked the little man and told him they would start searching for a volunteer immediately. And search they did: word went out to all of the kingdoms once more, looking for a voiceless child who had been born on the same day and at the same hour as the baby prince—but to no avail. Next they tried looking for a bird that had been born at the same time, because after all, birds can learn to talk, and they thought that would speed up the process. They found a beautiful big parrot, with plumage of bright red and dark purple, but the little man shook his head. "Too fragile," he said. So Lucia and Randolph continued their search. Next they found a puppy, but the little man shook his head once more. "Can't you hear her talking?" he asked. "This puppy clearly already has a voice of her own."

LAURA MAY

Finally, after every other species on Raduga had been exhausted, a farmer (who was King of Autumn Zephyrs in his own right) came to the palace with a tiny baby horse. "He was born at the same time, and on the same day," he said, "and he hasn't made a peep since."

The little man looked at the foal, who looked back with intelligent eyes. He spoke with it, waiting for a response, but heard nothing back. He taught it how to nod, and asked whether it would mind helping the prince. At last, the little man announced that he was ready to install the missing voice of the prince's heart.

The Prince of Putting Strangely Misplaced Things in New Places—for that is who the usually-unpopular little man was—secreted himself away with the baby horse and prince in a room of the palace, while Randolph and Lucia waited anxiously outside. At first there was muttering, then whispering, then a great slamming sound, and finally more muttering. At long last, there was a prolonged creak, which the two parents were struggling to place until they realised that the door had opened in front of them. They looked down at the very little man, and wearily he said "it is done." Rushing past him, they entered the room to find the foal plonked on the floor by the baby prince.

"That man is scary," said the baby horse. "Can I have a cuddle?"

Randolph and Lucia looked at each other, looked at the foal, looked at the baby, looked at each other again, and then advanced on the two newborns. Lucia put her arms around the baby horse, while Randolph picked up the prince and cuddled him.

That baby prince was Vanya, and it's with him and his talking horse that this story *really* begins.

ACT 1: HAPPILY EVER AFTER

LAURA MAY

1 ON RAISING IMPERFECT PRINCESSES

There has never been a fairy-tale about just a prince and his horse, and this tale is no exception. There is also a fair princess, who will shortly become a damsel in distress. Her name is Melodia, daughter of King Frederik and Queen Amora of Rather Fishlike Things—a powerful if somewhat vague domain. But to understand Melodia, we have to go further back, and learn about how her fate and that of her mother was changed thanks to a rather cheeky bee.

When Melodia's mother met Frederik, she had a name much more ordinary than 'Amora'. In fact, she was significantly more ordinary in *every* way: she was heir to the kingdom of Rather Fishlike Things, but was otherwise a fairly normal, if not boring, girl. She enjoyed ordinary things, like playing with the family's friendly seals, walking through the woods, talking with friends and of course, eating a lot of chocolate. (Chocolate has special significance in Raduga, and anyone who doesn't consume massive amounts is considered *déclassé* at best.) Agnes—for that's what Amora was originally called—would get up

every morning, do some very sensible stretches, have a plain breakfast, read some educational books, have an ordinary lunch, a carefully timed nap, and a sedate play-time. The day would finish with eating a predictable dinner and getting an early night. Thus did the weeks pass, end on end, with little or no variation.

Then one day, something *unusual* happened. Agnes was sitting, drinking hot chocolate and eating some chocolate sauce-covered chocolate chips. She had her usual perfect posture and was wearing her usual calm expression, when her impassivity was suddenly disturbed by curiosity about the thing flying toward her. It was about the length of a thumb, furry, with black and yellow stripes and a meandering manner. Dithering hither and thither, and seemingly distracted by a need to do loops in its path, the creature finally reached Agnes and stopped, an arm's length from her face.

Agnes and the creature studied each other for a moment. Suddenly, the apparition spoke: "Are you Agnes of Rather Fishlike Things?" it asked. Slightly bemused, Agnes nodded. "Hello," it then said. "I'm B."

"B?" asked Agnes. "Don't you mean *a* bee?"

"Well, that too," agreed B. "But I mean that my name is B."

"Doesn't that get confusing?" asked Agnes. "That's like if I were called 'person'."

"It doesn't really work like that," replied B. "B's my name and my rank; things work a little differently for Bs. I mean, bees."

"How so?" wondered Agnes.

"Well, I belong to PALS, you see—the Prince(ss)ly Alliance Lettering Service. And in the PALS, the shorter your name, the higher your rank."

Agnes pondered for a little while. "But what if your parents give you a really long name? What if they, say, called you Kananinoheaokuuhomeopuukaimanaalohilo?"

"Called you *what?!?*"

PICKLES AND PONIES

"Kananinoheaokuuhomeopuukaimanaalohilo."

"There's no way that's a real name," said B.

"Sure it is. I read about it in an educational book. It's quite lovely, don't you think?"

"Um, sure," said B. "But anyway, that wouldn't be allowed in the PALS. We all begin with an eight-letter name: that's normal for bees, anyway."

"Can there really be so many eight-letter names?" asked Agnes.

"You think Kananinoheaokuu-whatsit's a name, but not that having eight letters is normal? My best friends are Algernon and Griselda."

"Algernon?! Griselda?! Surely not."

B stiffened up (as much as a bee is really able to). "I'll have you know that Griselda is a very popular name in our hive. It's certainly no sillier than 'Agnes!'"

"I think we'll have to agree to disagree," replied Agnes. "But anyway—if all PALS have eight letters in their name, what happened to yours?"

Swelling up with barely concealed pride, B explained: "Originally my name was Barnabee, but as our rank in the PALS gets higher, we lose letters. So after the first time I was promoted, I was Barnabe, then Barnab, then Barna, Barn, Bar, Ba, and finally B."

"Wow, so you must be a very important pal!"

"It's *PALS*, and yes. I'm as important as can bee!" B chortled. "Just a little B humour there. I'm very lucky I was given such a sensible name, actually—Winthrop had a terrible time when he was applying for promotion. Nobody wanted to promote him past 'Winthro', because 'Winthr' is too hard to say. And we hardly ever name baby bees 'Mathilde', because *nobeedy* likes math."

"I like math."

"Well, you're not a bee."

"I suppose not. Anyway, B, this is all very interesting, but what bee you doing here?"

"What?" asked a baffled B.

"Bee humour?"

"Right... Funny. I, uh, 'bee' here beecause—" (here B broke off to chortle, while Agnes looked at him archly and wondered why it was funny when *he* did it) "—I bee carrying—" (more chortling) "—a message for you. From the Prince of Decorative Chimneys."

"The prince of what?"

"I bee starting to think you need your hearing checked. The *Prince of Decorative Chimneys*."

"Who on Raduga needs a decorative chimney?" queried Agnes.

"Look, I really didn't stop to have a chat, I just picked up the letter and brought it to you. Do you bee wanting it, or not?"

"Please stop saying 'bee'," said Agnes.

"Racist," muttered B. Agnes just looked at him. "Fine. Do you have a scroll of paper handy?" Agnes nodded, and held it out. "Here's your letter," he said, reaching behind one of his stripes to pluck out a teensy magnifying glass and a transparent sheet covered in tiny scratchings. With a dramatic flair, B placed the sheet on the magnifying glass, then moved the glass around until refracted sunlight started to burn letters onto Agnes' outstretched piece of paper. The princess watched, until finally she held a letter in her hands.

"I've also bee-n—" Agnes gave a sharp look, "—hey, 'been' is a real word! So I've *bee*-n paid to take back your reply. When you're ready, pop some flowers out on your window-sill, and I'll come to fetch the response. Clover's my favourite, if you could manage it."

"Thank you, Mr B," said Agnes. "I'll see what I can do."

"Great! Then I'll bee seeing you!" and with that, B cartwheeled in the air and soared off to wherever it was he had come from.

Agnes, holding the letter in hands, started turning it around in an attempt to figure out which was the right way

PICKLES AND PONIES

up. The process would have been easier if what was originally poor hand-writing hadn't then been transcribed by a bee and the notoriously wavy-handed sun. (The sun always takes its transcribing duties lightly, to boot.) Eventually, she determined where the beginning of the letter was, and started to read.

“Dearest Princess Agnes, of Rather Fishlike Things.

My name is Frederik, and I'm the Prince of Decorative Chimneys. I know that it's not very impressive compared to your own kingdom, and that you don't know me, and I feel terrible imposing like this—but I simply have to tell you about a prophecy I was recently granted by the Witch of Wells.

You see, the Witch lives in our palatial backyard. We don't have a very big domain, but our palace has rather a lot of decorative chimneys, and more to the point, a rather lovely well. The well was my great-great-grandfather's pride and joy: he decided to design the well to be a chimney into the earth, you see. At that time our domain included *all* chimneys, not just the frivolous types. The well-chimney is the epitome of a good chimney: it has a smooth façade of pink marble, a straight shaft leading to the water below, and a cap of white jasmine on a wooden frame. My great-great-grandfather was ecstatic just to make a chimney which included wooden parts: they don't work so well with fireplaces, as I'm sure you can imagine.

To cut a long story short, our well is the most beautiful well around: it may even be the most beautiful well in Raduga. That seems to be what the Witch of the Well thinks, and she's an expert in this sort of thing. So she's spent most of her

LAURA MAY

life by the well, taking care of the jasmine, and reading peoples' futures in the reflections far below. For the past few years though, she's gotten tired of prophesying for strangers, and has stopped seeing petitioners at all. Instead, she mainly seems happy to sit by the well, listening quietly to the stone and occasionally smiling to herself.

One day recently though, the Witch became thirsty and so lowered a bucket for some water (carefully avoiding looking into the reflections), when the rope snapped and the bucket dropped into the well. Startled, she inadvertently looked into the water and had a vision: and that vision was that I would marry the Princess of Rather Fishlike Things." (At this point in reading, Agnes paused, rather taken aback by the prince's presumption.)

"I told her it couldn't possibly be right, that the princess of such a vast domain would never be interested in the prince of a kingdom as pitiful as that of Decorative Chimneys, but the Witch insisted that I at least seek a meeting with you: she hates being accused of misprophecy.

And so, Princess, here it is: would you do me the great honour of permitting me to visit, in order to lay this prophecy to rest, once-and-for-all? I humbly await your response.

Yours, (because it's polite, not because I believe in prophecies)

Frederik."

This was the first strange thing (well, after meeting B) that had ever happened to Agnes, and she didn't know quite what to do about it. Following a tradition held by not-quite-Adults everywhere, she didn't show the letter to her parents, instead keeping it to herself. In fact, hiding

PICKLES AND PONIES

things is one of the first signs that the gu-fairies will soon strike: they can sense secrecy, and the taste sensation of secret-laden non-Adult is too much for them to resist.

After a couple of weeks of indecision, Agnes procured some clover and sat it on her window. She then kept careful guard over it, waving away any flying insects that approached, until B appeared just as she was dozing off.

"Hello!" he buzzed.

"Hello B!" Agnes smiled. "I have a reply for you."

"For me?" asked B. "Why, what did I ask?"

Agnes frowned. "No, I mean, the answer's not *for* you, it's for Frederik. I was being idiomatic."

"More like idiotic," giggled B.

Suddenly, something else started approaching the window. Agnes saw it first, zooming toward them—it looked like... it couldn't be? It looked like a small flying 'e'. "What on Raduga is that?" she asked, and B turned to look. He blanched (as much as a black and yellow bug can really blanch).

"Oh, no!" he cried. "It's my 'e!'"

"Your what?"

"My *!* I'm being demoted!" In desperation, B turned back to Agnes. "Really miss, Miss Princess, Agnes, I'm so sorry—no, I'm *ever* so sorry—I said you were being idiotic. Really, I didn't mean it! Please forgive me!"

The 'e' slowed, hovering in the air mere metres from the two. Agnes looked from it to B, thinking. "So, if I forgive you, you don't get demoted?" she asked.

"That's right miss—please, I don't want to be a two-letter!"

Agnes thought some more. "I *suppose* I could forgive you... but it would cost you." (Agnes had no way of knowing, but this was the very moment the gu-fairies put her at the top of their 'flavour of the week' list: extortion adds a rare and delicious tang to non-Adult flesh!)

"Yes, Princess, *anything!* Well, within reason—I guess I could always be promoted again."

LAURA MAY

"Hmm. Okay. After you take this message back to Frederik, you'll keep taking messages between us, for as long as we want you to, free-of-charge."

B wilted. "But it's such a long way as the bee flies," he complained, and the 'e' started drawing closer again.

"That's your choice, I'm afraid," replied Agnes. "You can Be, or not to B."

"Really?" replied a dejected B. "Bee humour, at a time like this?"

"You know it!" smiled Agnes, smugly.

"Okay then," agreed B. Hearing that (or otherwise sensing it—nobody knows whether 'e's have ears or not), the unwanted letter gave a little bounce in the air and swished away.

"Now, as to my first message," said the princess. "You can tell him 'yes'."

"Just 'yes'?" asked B, with an air of disappointment (it really was quite the emotional roller-coaster).

"Just 'yes'," replied Agnes, and B buzzed off.

No sooner had B departed, than there was the sound of wings once more. "B?" queried Agnes. "Back so fast?"

But it wasn't B. No: it was a giant cloud of scheming, toothy, winged, and *hungry* gu-fairies.

"No!" screamed Agnes. "Not *Adulthood!*"—but it was too late, and with a fluster of wings, the cloud descended.

Two weeks later, Agnes' incubation ended, and she dropped from the cocoon she'd made below her bedroom window. With terror, she realised she was falling toward the solid stone courtyard and would surely crack her head open. Death was mere seconds away! However, terror turned to surprise the moment she hit the ground. For some reason, solid stone wasn't as solid as she thought it would be: it was firm, yes, but it was almost like it reached out to catch her, and now cradled her in big stony arms. 'If I'd known it would feel like this,' thought Agnes, 'I would have jumped from my window *years* ago!'

Slowly regaining her senses, Agnes started to look

PICKLES AND PONIES

around her, anticipating an ants-eye view from the courtyard. She was confused to find that everything looked much as it normally did from eye-level. What was going on? Finally, she had the good sense to look at the stones wrapped around her, and all of a sudden she realised they were arms.

"Wh-what?" murmured the confused Agnes. Giving her head a shake, she glanced up and found herself looking at a big stony face. It was rather a good-looking face actually, with earnest and friendly eyes, and it was smiling at her in a way that made her feel strangely perturbed. "Stony?" she asked the face, realising as she did so that it was a regular person face, and not made of stone at all.

"Actually, it's Frederik," answered the face and the eyes and the smile.

"Oh," said Agnes, and started to smile, at first tremulously and then like she really meant it.

Needless to say, after such a fortuitous beginning, Frederik and Agnes's relationship blossomed like a house on fire. Despite the differences in their domains, they eventually married—not for Power nor Strategy, but for Love, which is the rarest of all.

Soon enough, Agnes fell pregnant, and as it made her rather unfortunately ill, she spent a lot of time inside reading. At first she read anything and everything that was put in front of her, until one day she encountered the classic romantic epic 'One Crooked Shoe'. It made such a huge impression on her that from then on she refused to read anything other than books of chivalry and romance: it reminded her of how she and Frederik had come to be together. She became obsessed with towers, and stolen princesses, and heroic princes, and the things that princesses should and shouldn't do, and most of all with Love. She related to the princesses in the books who were victims of a love like hers and Frederik's, and started to feel that 'Agnes' wasn't a name nearly glamorous enough to suit her romantic circumstances. Thus, shortly before

Melodia was born, she changed her name to Amora.

Amora became no less love-crazy following the birth of her daughter—on the contrary, she would read her books aloud to Melodia every day. This didn't stop when Melodia learned to talk, and as the young princess grew, she came to love the books more than life itself. She knew every word, every unspoken rule, every act of chivalry, and every detail of how a 'proper' princess should behave. She learned that princesses shouldn't do what they *could* do, but rather what the books ordained: thus, despite being rather good at running and climbing trees, she turned her attention to posing and needle-work. Rather than studying geography or science, she learned to recite poetry and make sandwiches.

Frederik, who hadn't known his queen during childhood, came to believe that this obsession with chivalry and high romance was normal, and therefore did nothing to deter the love-mad tendencies of his wife and daughter. And so things continued until Melodia's sixteenth birthday.

On that fateful day, Melodia woke up early, cleaned her teeth, shamefully squeezed her pimples, brushed her hair one hundred times, put on princessly make-up, and finally descended to breakfast. She greeted her father ("good morning, dear Father"), her mother ("good morning, dearest Mother"), and sat herself down. She graciously accepted her birthday wishes, and being a very proper young lady, commenced eating in a most civilised and delicate manner, not even asking about presents.

Finally, every scrap of food had been carefully cut up, chewed forty times, and swallowed, and breakfast was over. Frederik meanwhile had finished his breakfast long before (after all, he didn't subscribe to the notions of 'proper behaviour' held by the women of his family), and had been fussing about in the garden. Once Melodia and her mother had finished breakfast, they heard footsteps scurrying away. This was followed shortly by another set

PICKLES AND PONIES

of steps approaching, accompanied by a strange clapping sound.

Melodia already had some idea of what would arrive through the door, but she held herself very still, with her expression not a twitch from placid. She didn't permit herself to move until finally her father appeared in the doorway leading a beautiful, long-maned pony. "Happy birthday to my little princess," he said, in a way that most would consider somewhat nauseating.

"Oh, Father!" cried Melodia. "A pony! How wonderful!" She got up to kiss her mother and father on the cheek, thanking them, before moving gracefully to the pony. "Hello," she said.

The pony, of course, said nothing in response. Unlike Vanya's horse, he wasn't afflicted with a random voice, and only spoke Ponese—a language which the people of Raduga rarely bothered to learn. The exception to this rule is, of course, the otherwise non-academic pygmy people of Pantata, a small region near the centre of Raduga. These particular pygmies make a living as acrobats, and are beloved throughout the land.

Three hundred years ago, the pygmies had lived in small huts at ground-level, happily hunting and eating their favourite food. However this food—pygmy pig—was becoming scarce, and one day they discovered that there were simply no more pygmy pigs left in all of Pantata. The poor pygmies became hungrier and hungrier, becoming even smaller in size, but for their protruding bellies. Then, one day, one poor protruding-bellied pygmy fell down to the ground in exhaustion and hunger, only to find himself looking at the sky. Or it *would* have been the sky if there weren't a great big tree in the way—and what should he see on the branches of this gigantic tree but parakeets.

To the hungry pygmy, the parakeets looked like the most delicious and colourful snack he'd ever seen, and half-crazed with hunger, he became the first pygmy to ever try to climb a tree. Of course, it wouldn't be much of a

story if he didn't in fact *succeed* in climbing a tree. Truly, it was the biggest tree in the forest, and it took our pygmy friend eight hours to reach the closest branch. When he reached it, the parakeets took off, flying to a branch above his head, and it took him another hour and a half to attain that new height. When at last he did, the parakeets flew back down to their original branch.

Meanwhile, pygmies at ground-level had been watching their friend with open curiosity. When they saw how the parakeets were flying away, they all wondered what to do, set up a camp-fire, and mulled over the situation with some mulled wine. Our tree-climbing pygmy was too tired to do any more climbing, so he sat and waited. The next day, the pygmies on the ground seemed to come to some kind of decision, and one after the other—a little like non-furry lemmings—they started to climb the tree. Given how incredibly large it was and how small the pygmies were, they looked almost like a line of ants making their way up the gigantic trunk.

Eventually, the first pygmy in the chain reached the first branch, and he stayed there, while the rest continued up the tree. They bypassed the second branch (where our tired friend from the day before was stationed), and each time they reached a new branch, one pygmy would stop climbing and sit upon it. It took another sixteen hours (the tree really was *immensely* large), but finally there was a pygmy on every single branch of the tree: in fact, as it turned out, there was exactly one Pantata pygmy for each branch: no more, no less.

At this point, the parakeets were at a bit of a loss. They were bird-brained at best, and their strategy of flying to a different branch was no longer working—every place they went to roost had a predatory pygmy on it. They weren't quite bright enough to think of changing trees, and so after a brief mid-air confab, they decided that what was good for the goose was good for the gander (or, in this case, what was good for the pygmy was good for the parakeet).

PICKLES AND PONIES

Each parakeet flew to a different branch and sat there by itself, with a complete lack of logic and almost invariably within arm's reach of a hungry pygmy. Thus began the massacre of the parakeets, and the end of the starvation of the pygmies.

Within a few hours, the ground below the colossal tree was littered with an array of colourful feathers, and the bellies of the pygmies had become distended through satiation rather than starvation. Full, they happily napped on their branches until the next day, when it became time to climb down.

However, no pygmy had ever tried to climb down a tree before. As one they looked down the terrifyingly long distance to the ground below, which thanks to the feathers, appeared as though it was covered in particularly colourful blood and grime. Sitting on their solitary branches, each pygmy quietly vowed to themselves that they weren't going to try the descent until somebody else did it first: and no longer being loopy with hunger, nobody was feeling brave enough. Everyone stayed put, and a full year later, they were still sitting in the tree.

By this time, the pygmies were acquainted with tree living, and not long after, started daring small adventures to the nearest branch, or to the other side of the tree. Slowly but surely they gained the confidence to move about on the tree, then to move *between* trees, and finally they threw caution to the wind and started showing a distinctly acrobatic flair when jumping from branch to branch. This is how pygmies became tree-dwellers.

Two hundred years after the pygmies had left the ground, a tall stranger came to observe them. He, being from that jaded class who call themselves the 'Civilised', wasn't particularly impressed: the pygmies lived a simple life, eating what they caught and cooked in the trees, chattering away in a series of incomprehensible sounds, and spending all of their remaining time jumping around and doing fancy flips through the air. Eventually, Mr

Civilised decided that there wasn't anything worth seeing, yelled up to a group of pygmies that they were "one-trick ponies", and left the forest forever.

However, though Mr Civilised couldn't understand the language of the pygmies, they understood a bit of *his* language. The idea of a 'trick pony' suddenly entranced them. Maybe they could incorporate some ponies into their normal jumping activities—that would be a *fine* way to pass the time. So the pygmies conferred, as they did before any major decision, and it was decided that a few would descend the trees to search for ponies.

Trepidatiously, those chosen made their way down the trunk, being the first pygmies to do so in two centuries. Three months later they returned, followed by a long chain of athletic-looking ponies. Excitedly, and not able to wait until they climbed the tree to show off, the pygmies on the ground put on an acrobatics exhibition with the ponies. They flipped from one pony to another, threw each other through the air, leaped through rings of fire, and stood on one another's shoulders while the ponies ran back and forth. Next, they took it to a whole new level, performing the tricks all over again, *along with the ponies*. You see, it turned out that the pygmy language was fairly similar to Ponese, and it was only a matter of weeks before the pygmies and ponies could converse fluently with one another. Thus, the pygmies were able to teach the ponies how to jump, how to do somersaults and backflips in the air, how to walk on just their fore- or back-legs, and how to stand on each other's shoulders. Watching from the branches, the pygmy audience was amazed to see ponies flipping through the air in an intricate formation, while pygmy acrobats launched from one to the other even as the animals were flying around. It was truly an extraordinary sight.

Very impressed, the watching pygmies couldn't *wait* to try it all for themselves, and called for their friends on the ground to come right up. Just as excitedly, the ground-

PICKLES AND PONIES

pygmies and the ponies started to make their way up the tree—or at least the pygmies did. While these ponies could run around with pygmies on their backs, do somersaults, and even walk on just two legs, they didn't have hands or feet: and hooves have never been made for climbing trees. Much as they tried, the ponies couldn't achieve anything other than scratch bark from the trunk. Nevertheless, they kept trying until the tree started complaining about the abuse and the ponies fell into an exhausted pile.

The pygmies were in rather a pickle (still not a literal pickle—pickles rarely come in pygmy size, either). They wanted to experience the glory of this new acrobatic challenge, but the tree had always been their home (pygmies don't have very long memories)—how could they possibly leave? Finally though, they knew that that was their only option, and so those in the tree gathered their things and made a slow descent. Pygmies have been ground-dwellers ever since.

The pony Melodia received for her birthday wasn't an acrobatic pony, of course: those ponies are known for running away to join the pygmy circus, and make terrible pets or companions. No, this pony was of that special breed known to love being kept in fancy stables and being rarely ridden by their keepers. They like the life of luxury, don't like to work hard for it, and moreover are particularly adorable and glossy-maned ponies, making them the perfect present for a princess.

Melodia was very grateful for her present, of course (although not *too* grateful, as that would have been unladylike), but in her heart of hearts there was something she wanted even more. Amora could see that her little girl wasn't quite perfectly happy on this, her special day, and she was determined to find out what the matter was.

"What is it, dear?" she asked. "Didn't you want a pony?"

"Oh, Mother," replied Melodia, "of *course* I wanted a

pony: all good princesses should have a pony, after all."

"Then what is it? Please, please tell us what the matter is."

"Really, it's nothing—I'm perfectly happy."

"Come now, I know there's something wrong. What is it your heart truly desires?" pressed Amora.

"Well..." began Melodia, not quite sure how to continue.

"Well?"

"It's just that... I'm a princess, and I'm sixteen today. Shouldn't I have found my Prince Charming by now?"

Amora looked at her, knowingly. "I see," she said. "Of course, it's unseemly to get married before you're eighteen—and, after all, you're not yet an Adult. But you're right: a princess as perfect as you should definitely have everything she wants." (Frederik, meanwhile, wasn't quite sure he was happy with the direction of this conversation, but he was used to his wife and daughter's overly romantic prattle, and hoped that they would soon move on to comparing the virtues of various fairy-tale princesses as usual.)

"So how do I *find* him?" asked Melodia, in a manner that would have been almost a whine if that weren't un-princess-like.

"Oh come now," replied Amora—"that's not how it happens in the books. The princess doesn't find the prince, the *prince* finds the *princess*: just like your father found me."

"But what if he's not looking?" quavered the princess.

"Hm," pondered the Queen. "I don't really see how that can be the case. After all, you are the most perfect princess. But—" (and here the Queen had a sudden flash of inspiration) "—how is it that princes in books find their perfect princess?"

"Well, it depends on the story: sometimes the princess is kidnapped by a dragon, sometimes she's inconveniently turned to stone, and sometimes she's stolen away by a

PICKLES AND PONIES

maleficent witch. Then the prince comes to rescue her, and they fall in love and live happily ever after!”

“Exactly!” exclaimed Amora. “So that’s what we need to do!”

At this point, Frederik burst in. “Ladies, we are absolutely *not* having Melodia taken away by a witch—or a dragon, for that matter. And we’re not having her turned to stone! She’s just *sixteen* for goodness’ sakes: she doesn’t need to be thinking about finding a husband. What does she even need a prince for, she’s not yet an Adult!” Incidentally, this last comment baffled Melodia somewhat. What in the world did finding her Prince Charming have to do with being an Adult?

Amora turned to her husband and looked at him sternly. “Obviously we won’t have her turned to stone, or stolen, or anything like that: the prince just needs to *rescue* her, she doesn’t actually need to be in *danger*. Well, not the life-threatening kind. Though I suppose it has to be a touch more dangerous than ‘in danger of boredom’ or some such.”

Melodia was suddenly filled with hope. “What do you mean, Mother? What are you thinking?”

“Let’s set up a challenge, worthy of any prince, with you as the prize!”

Frederik quietly wondered to himself how he felt about having his daughter sold off to the winner of a competition. “But what if it’s the wrong prince for her?” he asked. “She won’t have to marry him then, will she?”

“What do you mean, the ‘wrong’ prince? The victor in these situations is always the perfect prince for the rescued princess,” answered Amora.

“Still, dear, that’s in books: I defer to your knowledge of romance and challenges and such things, but I really do insist—we married for love, and our daughter should do no less.”

“Okay, Father,” bounced Melodia. “I won’t marry him unless I really love him, though I don’t see how I won’t.”

LAURA MAY

But please—can we do this? Can I be a damsel in distress?
Please!"

Amora replied. "Of course you can, dear. We'll start putting arrangements into place immediately." And that's how Melodia found herself, two years later, stranded alone on a small island in the middle of the Lake of Belief.