

Once upon a time there was a little girl.

She was born in the midst of winter, a little shy of three weeks into the New Year. She was the first born to her middle-class parents, who lived in a small and cosy wooden house on the outskirts of their industrial town.

It was immediately agreed upon that she was the prettiest little girl and most perfect baby they ever did see, and named her Brigitte. She grew up to her name, and had skin as pale as snow, hair as light and blonde as spun flax, and brilliant hazel eyes above a slightly upturned nose. Her parents were very proud of her and wanted the best for her. She had a room all to herself on the small second floor of their home, and any extra money her parents could obtain was inevitably spent on their little princess. They had tried having more children, but for whatever reason the wife would not conceive.

“It is okay,” The husband said, comforting his wife one night after supper, “we have Brigitte, and she is a bright, beautiful child. We cannot afford much more than what we have, so maybe it’s a sign that we should only have one.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Said the wife sadly. But she still felt terrible and yearned for more than one child.

The father, Erhard Hertz, was a typographer at the town’s printing press. When Brigitte turned three, he started taking her to work with him, letting her play with all the unused letter-punches. She stayed quiet and out of the way, and even could identify some of the letters and

would help the men in charge of arranging. They all praised Mr.Hertz's daughter, saying she was very clever for so young an age. Mr.Hertz's chest would puff out with pride. He certainly hoped his daughter grew up to be clever; if he could have no son, then he would raise her to be as smart and independent as one.

One day, after Brigitte turned six, mother Diana found she was feeling nauseous. A few months later, she had to admit something was off, and with the weight gain around her stomach, she knew it was true. That evening after supper she gave the joyous news to her husband, and there was much celebration for the couple. The next day, they broke the good news to Brigitte, who seemed uncertain about the whole endeavor.

Half a year later, her mother gave birth to boy twins. One was stillborn, blue and choked. Brigitte hardly saw him before he was wrapped in white linen by the midwife and set to the side. She didn't think her mother noticed. The other was blonde and bloody, but alive. He cried when the midwife spanked him on the rump. Diana Hertz cried with joy. Brigitte frowned at the tiny, screaming cheese-faced *thing*.

That was the family's first born son. Born in early spring, he was second child to his middle class parents, and it was immediately agreed that he was the most lovable little boy and the most perfect baby the parents ever did see. He was given the name Amand. He grew to have hair blond as wheat, and bottle-green eyes over his button nose. His parents were very proud of him, called his birth a miracle, and built him a bedroom right across from Brigitte's. Any spare change they could scrape together was spent on Amand; nifty tops painted bright colours, a whirly-gig made of bright pewter, little army-men with brave faces and cheap felt

hats.

When Amand turned two, his father began taking him to work with him; and in that same year his mother gave birth to another child. A little sprig of a girl, her hair was a slightly darker shade than her siblings, though her eyes were no less green and light. Her parents claimed she was the brightest baby they have laid their eyes on, and named her Elena. Brigitte turned up her face at the child, and thought to herself that Elena didn't look all that special.

Once Elena turned three, she took to following Brigitte around, to the elder's annoyance. Brigitte would try to avoid her at all costs. But Brigitte dare not complain. She was her parent's little princess, she looked and dressed like one, so she *must* be one. And princesses were not selfish. Princesses did not complain. So Brigitte kept her mouth shut.

Her only respite was her reading lessons with her father in the evening, if he was not too tired from work. The printed word was beginning to become high in demand, and he often worked late.

Adding to his burden, his wife had given birth to a fourth child, a boy named Clemens. His parents said he seemed a very gentle, quiet baby, what with his sandy blond hair, and soft round eyes. They were pleased at the birth of another boy, and Brigitte was beginning to think that the house was getting a little crowded. Elena was moved into Brigitte's bedroom to make room for the new baby. Brigitte kept her mouth shut.

Another year passed, and with it, another child was born. This one, another boy, almost

always looked rather indignant. He was given the name Fiete. At only age twelve, Brigitte was pulled out of school in order to help her mother take care of the children and the house. Muttering under her breath, Brigitte could not believe her terrible luck.

She had also undergone a rather dramatic growth spurt, and could no longer fit into the last of her favourite dresses. It had bright print, and lace and ribbon trim all along the edges. It was begrudgingly passed down to Elena, and Brigitte eagerly awaited her new dress, expecting it to be as nice or *better than* her last one. After all, she was the beautiful, clever, eldest daughter. The princess of the family – shouldn't she be dressed the best?

Her mother handed her a box that evening. The dress was a flat, monotone burgundy that went to the ankles. It had black buttons.

Her fingers itched to throw it into the fireplace.

Two more years, and the house was blessed with another little '*miracle*'. She was a baby girl, blonde like her siblings, but the first to have blue eyes. She always seemed nervous, and was easily distraught, and also very fickle. She was given the name Gisa, and was another addition to Brigitte's room.

A final two years, and Brigitte was sixteen. Her mother had recently gave birth to her final child, a girl named Heidi.

Brigitte wore her finest –and only– Grey dress to the christening. Her younger sisters wore

dresses that had previously been handed down from her. Elena wore the floral one with the blue bows. Gisa wore the white one trimmed with blue lace. All three boys wore suspenders, hose and their Sunday shirts. She could feel people looking at her plain attire the whole time, and she felt nothing but shame. She was fourteen now, she was a young lady. Brigitte was *supposed* to be looking presentable in order to appear attractive to prospective husbands. And now, here she was, in a respectable public place, dressed in the lowest of drab.

She knew her parents were short on cash, but in her opinion, that could have been avoided if they never had so many children. Brigitte had been happy when it was just the three of them. But at least they had to get by with her father's moderate pay.

A few weeks after Brigitte turned seventeen, her father was brought home in a cart pulled by a horse. He was missing half an arm. There had been an accident at the press; the machine's supports had been faulty. The arm had been too mangled to save. He was mercifully only demoted to position of simple laborer, rather than be fired entirely, but it was not enough to support the large family. His wife took up a cook job at the residence of the honorable *Wildgraf*, trying to earn more for her family, if even only a pittance.

Brigitte became the main caretaker of the house and children. She hated every second of it. She hated having to wake up before dawn to start prepping meals in lieu of her absent mother, who was prepping meals for another household. She hated losing her free time - once dedicated to books and writing and beauty – to cleaning and running after her siblings.

Brigitte feared that with all her time stuck inside the house, all of her schoolmates

would forget who she was. If not for church, she wouldn't see anyone from town. She knew that she would be forgotten about, just some pretty girl who never amounted to anything because her parents made bad choices and forced her to pick up the slack. With such isolation, she would never be married. Brigitte felt that she would be trapped in her family home until she died.

When all hope seemed lost, her mother came home one night with exciting news. Elder *Wildgraf* Burgstaller was eagerly awaiting the return of his nineteen-year-old son from his abroad schooling. It would take nearly six months for him to make it home, but Count Burgstaller had wanted a huge party to celebrate his youngest son's return.

"That young man is the last child that man has left that hasn't been married off into another country." Her mom said. "No wonder he wants to throw a big party when he returns."

"A big party?" Brigitte asked, passing over a drowsy Heidi and a warm bottle to her mother.

"Yes," her mother replied, taking the child with open arms. "It's to be a huge ball, with the whole town invited. Isn't that exciting? Wildgraf Burgstaller hasn't thrown a party like that since I was a girl."

Brigitte could see it now, a grand ball, all the townsfolk dressed in their best - which for some was nothing more than a cleaner smock – and all fraternizing regardless of rank for only a single night. This was her chance. She could see the plan now, as perfect as a fairy-tale. Go to the ball, dolled up to the nines, find a rich man, get his attention, dance the night away, capture

his heart and live happily ever after. Easy. She was already beautiful enough to get attention, long blonde hair past her lower back, smooth and shiny as corn silk, deep set eyes and a round face that showed her youth. Finding any man should not have been a problem for her, if not for being tied to her home day in and day out.

“Mother,” Brigitte inquired, “Can I attend this party?”

“Of course dear,” Her mother answered. “I don’t see why not. You could wear your grey church dress, it would not be good to attend in your everyday wear. Oh, I bet all the young people will be going, You may meet a young man there... perhaps I will ask your father about accompanying you.”

Brigitte felt despair at the thought of attending in the horrid grey dress normally reserved for mass.

“Mother,” She pleaded. “Do you not think I should wear something a bit more... appropriate? That dress is so plain and modest – perfect for Church, of course – but a party demands something a bit more fancy, do you not agree?”

Her mother sighed, adjusted the toddler on her lap.

“Brigitte darling, we don’t have the money to buy you a new dress. The boys are growing like weeds, and Elena had to get one made for her only a month ago.” She smiled at her daughter, looking overly optimistic. “But men love modesty, I am sure they will enjoy seeing such a fine

young lady acting honest with such plain garb. And even if you do not meet anyone that night, me and your father have a suitor in mind for you. Dieter, the son of your father's old school friend, remember him? From the next town over? They have plenty of land, enough for their own farm!"

She patted Brigitte on the shoulder supportively. "Don't worry my dear, we have a plan for you."

"Of course Mama. Thank you for thinking of me."

Her mother nodded, "Of course dear." and turned her attention back to Heidi, still awake on her lap.

Brigitte went to stand outside in the dark, as she knew she'd get no peace in her crowded room. She stood stiffly, horrified by her own future.

A farmer, they planned to marry her to a farmer. She, pretty enough to be a princess, and they were going to waste her on *Dieter*, the dunce cow-boy a day trip away at the next village. This cannot do. She needed to meet someone at the ball.

But her dress. No matter her beauty, no man of higher breeding would every look her way if she did not seem to be moderately well-to-do herself. Not only that, but her grey Sunday dress was more than modest. It was downright unflattering. She herself was a slim, willowy girl, and not as... *physically defined* as she would like to be. The grey dress made from stiff cotton

fabric did little to help with that; when wearing it she looked like a birch twig.

She could work too, earn some money to buy a dress. Her parents would never let her, since she was needed at home, but Brigitte was good at keeping secrets. She would make sure the kids would as well. Besides, Elena was eleven now, she was plenty old enough to start helping out at home.

The next week, Brigitte went to the home of Wildgraf Burgstaller, looking for work. In such a large castle, isolated by the forest, there was little chance that her mother would run into her, and with so many servants, none would care to talk about her presence.

Her job was that of a laundry-woman, in order to ease the maid's work. She'd wake up, make breakfast for her siblings, shove them out the door: Amand to work with his father, Clemens, Fiete and Gisa to school, while Elena - in on Brigitte's secret - stayed home and watched Heidi. Then Brigitte would run to the castle, strip off the sheets, gather used clothes, wash them and the blankets, hang them up. She would run home in order to have food prepared before the children came home for lunch.

Then she ran back to the castle the moment her siblings were back out the door, took in the sheets and blankets, folded some and put others back on the bed. It was so big of a task that she barely got back before four, when her siblings got home from school. Exhausted and overworked, her enthusiasm began to lack after only a week, and Brigitte feared she would hardly be able to keep it up.

...Then she got paid. The weight of the silver vereinsthaler in her palm made it more than worth it. She skipped home, and the coin was put in a glass jar, hidden on the highest shelf of her old wardrobe. Every week another coin was added, and Brigitte's joy grew. Sometimes, late at night when her sisters in her room were sleeping, she'd stand on her tip toes, pull out the jar, and admire the sparkling silver pieces inside.

Time flew, and spring came around. The ball was to be held in just a week. Wildgraf Burgstaller's son, the young Wildgraf Ulrich had returned, and Brigitte had caught a glimpse of the young man while out hanging up laundry. He was tall and raven-haired, clean-shaven and fit. He seemed refined and gentlemanly – true husband material. Brigitte grew shy when he passed close to the clothesline and hid her face behind one of the hanging wool blankets. It was settled; he would be the goal of that weekend's ball.

Brigitte had a fair stack of silver coins now. The jar had only been an old pickle jar, but it was now three-quarters full. There was a pre-made dress on display at the town seamstresses', and Brigitte felt it was the perfect one. It had a full skirt below short sleeves and a low necked bodice, rich red-violet in colour, with vine-patterned brocade layered behind its many folds. A large, shimmering silk bow tied on the back. It came with a fashionable hat, lace lining it and feathers adorning it. Brigitte almost had enough money. She assumed she may need to steal a few coins from her parents' emergency fund, but that was forgivable. Once she was countess, the *WildGräfin*, she could always pay them back.

That Friday, the eve before the ball, she worked doubly hard, trying to get her work done as soon as possible. With that day's paycheck, she could run to the seamstresses and buy

the dress, and then quit her life of manual labour forever. She was so jittery with excitement her washing was rushed, leaving some stains not lifted, and the head maid told her to redo it twice before she gave up and dismissed Brigitte for lunch.

Brigitte was running late from her re-washings that morning. She knew she would not make it home in time to have a meal ready. In fact, her siblings should already be home for lunch, and would likely be waiting impatiently in the kitchen, curious as to where she was. Brigitte hoped that Elena would try to start cooking without her. Her younger sister had little-to-no experience in the kitchen, but trying to feed the family would be good practise. *Once I get married she'll need to start doing the cooking.* Brigitte thought. *She might as well start now.*

She ran the dirt path through the woods down to the clearing of her family home, thinking up excuses as she went. The house came into view. Black smoke billowed out of a window, wafted out from the chimney. Brigitte paused, looking upon the inferno. She could see brief licks of flame through the clouded glass windows. The fire seemed to have come from the kitchen.

Brigitte ran to the front door, threw it open. *My money*, she thought. *I need to save my money.*

She bent low while walking in the hall, covering her mouth to avoid breathing in smoke. She wasn't sure if she was hearing screaming, or if the cries were just her mind twisting the roaring and cackling of the fire into something it wasn't. *The fire*, she decided. *It was just the roar of the fire and splintering wood.* But even if it wasn't... she figured that her parents could just make new ones. They had no problem doing so before, no reason why they couldn't do so again –

while she was far away in her own castle.

She ran up the staircase. The heat was choking: frizzing her hair, forcing her eyes to water, making it hard to breathe. She crawled to her doorway, pulled open the door. The fire had yet to spread upwards to her room, but the floor was still hot. It creaked as she put her weight on it.

On her tip-toes, she reached the wardrobe. The glass was farther back than she remembered. Her fingers scrambled at the warm glass, trying to nudge it towards her. She pulled out a wardrobe drawer and stood on it.

The jar was now in reach. Cradling it like a child, she went to climb down. Her dress caught in the drawer, she fell to the side, and the wardrobe tipped over after her. It fell onto the weakened floorboards; crashed all the way through into the kitchen below. Orange and yellow fiery tongues reached up through the hole, greedy for oxygen. They lapped at her dress. Brigitte dropped the jar and scrambled back from the hole, swatting at the fabric desperately. The jar rolled across the uneven flooring, silver coins clinking, stopped right on the edge of the wardrobe sized gap. Brigitte gasped.

She crawled forward, reached for the jar. It teetered on the edge. Brigitte lunged for it. The wood near the edge was too unstable – it couldn't take the weight. The floor plunged out from under her. The jar shattered in the fall, the coins melted in the heat, and for once, Brigitte wasn't focused on her money.

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Once upon a time there had been a young lady.

She had been born in the midst of winter, a little shy of three weeks into the new year. She had been the first born to her middle-class parents, who once had lived in a small and cozy wooden house on the outskirts of their industrial town.

It had been agreed upon that she was the greediest little girl and most selfish lady anyone ever did see, and it was said that her name had been too good for her. Her pale skin had blackened and flaked away from the bone, blonde hair singed away to ashes, and once brilliant hazel eyes had boiled in their sockets. After the fire that destroyed her home, all that was found of her was charred bones mixed with ash in a puddle of silver.