

Interview with a Former Princess

Synopsis: A documentary broadcaster sits down to record an exclusive interview with a former princess about what post-royal fairy tale life holds for her.

“Once upon a time I believed all I needed to be was fearless, and I’d be able to achieve anything in the world I desired.” Beneath the glare of the camera lights she shifts uncomfortably in the chair opposite me, crossing one leg over the other while adjusting an uncharacteristically errant strand of jet black hair back into place. “Why is it we teach young girls to be fearless?” she asks. “I was once admired for it by all the townsfolk of the kingdom, but look where that got me.”

Indeed. Once upon a time this woman knew exactly what she wanted, and exactly how to get it. Ambitious, headstrong. In a word...fearless. But fate is a fickle mistress and things have changed for the woman now seated before me. Outwardly she maintains a familiar calm composure, an aura of control, but there are subtle hints things have changed. She remains cautious and defensive. There’s a nervous twitch in the corner of her eye and her attention wavers as she is briefly distracted by one of our crew changing shot. The hours of official engagements, the spotlight of the fandom of the kingdom and the years of unrelenting scrutiny have all taken their toll. I start gently in order to gain her trust.

“Tell me,” I begin, “when did you first sense this wasn’t the life you’d always wanted?”

“Oh it was always what I’d wanted.” she replies. “I believed if I had enough courage I could make anything happen. I told it to myself enough times I started to believe I had no fear at all, and I guess for a time that was true. Eventually though, I realised everything I’d fought so hard to claim as my own, this royal life with all its trappings, none of it was real. A fearless life is not a life at all. A life free of fear is an illusion. It is a detachment from reality. Trust me there are things behind the facade of every princesses life that should be, at the very least...approached with caution. It always pays to check the fine print doesn’t it? Rumpelstiltskin taught me that. Getting what you want always comes with conditions in this world. Did you know I was once a lawyer in another story?”

I did. I just nod.

“Anyway, I knew what I was getting into, at least I thought I did, and I got my Prince Charming didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did. So how did the two of you meet when it seems to me like you were living in completely different stories?”

“We were, but we’re not talking about him coming from royal descent and me being a mere commoner. Not that that’s ever been a barrier a resourceful girl with a good pair of glass shoes can’t overcome. We were literally living in completely different stories. Luckily we both had a mutual acquaintance, a minor character really, but someone who’d a part to play in

both our worlds, who kind of brought our stories together. You know, like Kelly Taylor in 90210 and Melrose Place, that sort of thing. You see?”

I didn't. I just nod.

“There are going to be young women watching this,” I say, trying to steer the conversation back on course, “who are going to struggle to reconcile the decision you've made, to leave the fairy tale life behind. Why give it all away?”

“Because it was just that, a fairy tale. Just because you're living the fairy tale dream, doesn't somehow mean all your own inner demons are magically vanquished. Those stories are so passé these days. I was living in a gilded cage. It was all lies.”

“What about Prince Charming? How did he feel about this decision to step down as fairy tale characters and write your own story?”

“We talked about it obviously, and after many months of reflection and internal discussions, we chose to make this transition. We had to. Because like all fairy tales, it wasn't real. Not the part about the way he felt about me, that bit was always true, but Charming isn't even a real prince! The king was only ever his foster father.”

“Yes, tell me about your relationship with your husband's foster father. How difficult was it?”

“Difficult? It was a nightmare!”

“But surely in the beginning things weren't bad, the king offered to give you away on your wedding day after all?”

“Only because he didn't understand he wasn't actually giving me away. At least he knows by now no one gets rid of me that easily.”

“Nevertheless you had your happy ending, so what changed your ever after?”

“Oh there's the obvious things. The daily scrutiny of your every move. Your entire life being judged not on your achievements, but your smile, your outfit and your ability to produce future heirs on demand. Sure, there'll be the usual critics saying 'but she knew what she was

getting herself in for' and to an extent that's true. I knew all these things, and I believed I could handle them. What I wasn't prepared for was the constant double standard. You see Charming and I would never have the same status as the king's other children. It would be they who'd one day succeed to the throne. I was never going to be truly royal, and didn't the king and that evil old witch he married after Charming's mother died, take pleasure every opportunity they got to remind me. One day I was running late on my way to a state dinner being hosted by Charming's family. On the way to the dining room I found the king, but instead of helping me he pulled me to one side and said 'I'm afraid this is a family only affair'. When I pointed out that since Charming and I were now married I was family he whispered in my ear, 'Not my family you're not, nor will you ever be.'

I kept asking myself, why do I keep on trying to fit in with these people? Why do I waste my time trying to please them? I know these people don't like me, and never will. Why do I keep putting myself in a position to be hurt?"

"And why did you?"

"Because back then I was still under the delusion all I needed to get through was to be fearless. A woman is only truly fearless because she has nothing left to lose, but a woman with nothing to lose is dangerous."

"But surely, you did have it all? Prince Charming? The castle? The lifestyle? Why throw it all away for...this?"

I look around the pallid walls of the little room where she now passes her days, a stark contrast to the gilded halls of the royal palace *The Cinderella Lakes Retirement Village for Former Princesses*. This is a place the fairy tale cameras rarely show. The place where former fairy tale princesses who've fallen on hard times see out their remaining days after the credits close on their happily ever after. It seems a bitter irony the residence bears the name of its founder, not only the oldest of the kingdom's previous princesses, but also the first who was not herself of royal descent.

Our interview is interrupted by yelling from the hallway outside. An argument is ensuing, or perhaps it's someone singing, in this place it's not always easy to distinguish. I get up to tell the offenders we're trying to conduct an interview here and poke my head around the corner of the doorway into the corridor. Outside two elderly ladies have locked the wheels of their walking frames as they try to pass in the narrow walkway. There is a decided chill in the air.

"For goodness sake Elsa, that was forty years ago. Why can't you just let it go?"

The storm outside rages on with no sign of abating so I decide to close the door and sit back down.

“How do you cope with that?” I ask.

“Thank you for asking, because almost no one ever does,” she says with almost brutal honesty. “Sometimes I don’t cope. The drugs they give you in this place help, but then again, I don’t want to end up like poor Snowy.”

“Snowy?”

She points in the direction of the hallway which leads towards the rooms near the entrance where the crew and I first arrived, and I recall the image of what we thought at the time was a medical model in a glass display case to demonstrate the effects of addiction.

“Miss White was hounded by the climate change activists when they found she was funded through her connections in the mining industry. Her husband abandoned her and she turned to the drugs to battle the anxiety. Now they’re keeping her in a medically induced coma until he returns.”

“Until he returns?”

“Unlike some of the newer girls, she wasn’t a modern princess. She came from the classical fairy tale world where even princesses remained reliant on the patriarchy for salvation.”

“So only his kiss will wake her?”

“His signature. He holds power of attorney. It was a man’s world back then,” she shrugs.

“Does it scare you that in this post-happy ending world, this could still somehow now be your own destiny?” No sooner has the question left my mouth than the words seem to fall straight to the ground and shatter between us. I’m no stranger to interviewing princesses, so the directness surprises us both. I decide not to retract the words, instead leaving them to flap and struggle on the floor between us until she decides what she will do with them. I sense there’s a moral to this story, this once adored princess, now as washed up as Ariel in room 406, wants to share with the thousands of young hopefuls watching.

“Scared? I hadn’t really thought of it like that before. I suppose I am yes, but that’s okay.” She looks down from the glare of the cameras and pauses, perhaps considering whether she is ready to commit to the words she wants to say next on camera, or maybe she’s rearranging the broken letters still lying on the floor in a more pleasant arrangement.

“Yes, at first I was very scared. I was leaving the fairy tale world I was living in behind. How would I make money? How would I support myself? It’s not like I could just take up hair braiding or something, like Rapunzel. But that’s when I realized the very thing I was held up as a role model for was all wrong.”

“Is that how you see yourself now? A role model?”

“In a way, yes.”

“Then what lesson do you think you’re trying to teach the young girls of today who are following your story? Are you now saying they should embrace fear?”

“Oh gosh no! I’m full of fear for my future now and I hate it, but we shouldn’t be holding aloft as an ideal for young women to aspire to be fearless. We should be telling them that it’s okay to feel fear when they do. You don’t want to switch it off. Strive not to be fearless, but to fear less. I know there are detractors who think like I’m benefitting from a world where a character like me should never have belonged in the first place, but now I’m writing my own story.”

“Ah yes, I’d heard that.” My eyes scan the room until they come to rest upon a closed laptop on the desk in the corner. “You realise most people don’t just become successful writers overnight, it takes a great deal of patience and persistence.”

“I’m not most people,” she retorts, “I am a princess, and I am already working on a publishing deal with my agent.”

“Former princess,” I remind her. She appears more than a little agitated by the correction.

“Every time you begin a new chapter you’re taking a step into the unknown. You will experience fear, but there’s no point in waiting until you’re no longer afraid, because that time might never come.”

I check out the grey of the cell-like little room around us. I can't help but feel she seems a little delusional.

“So are you able to tell me a little about your new story?”

“Well, that would spoil the surprise wouldn't it?”

“Don't you want your fans to know what they can expect? What about your former royal family? How do you think they will react to your story?”

“Let's just say for all that time I spent living trapped in a castle I learned quite a bit about what really happens that the average townsfolk never get to read about. It's not your typical fairy tale, more of a horror story, and I'm going to make sure that former foster father in law of mine and his family don't live quite so happily ever after.”