

Three Princesses

PAULA MORRIS

The picture hanging near the sliding glass door looked familiar. Fraser wondered if he'd seen the real thing in a museum somewhere else in Europe.

'It's not Estonian,' the elfin hotel receptionist told him. 'But I don't know who did it. It is a painting of three sisters. I can find out the artist name for you.'

She frowned at her computer screen, as though such information might be listed on the hotel's website.

It wasn't a real painting; it was a print in a gilt frame. Fraser supposed it was like the other pictures in the public areas of the hotel, chosen to make guests feel cosy and Baltic and medieval, despite the No Smoking signs and the shiny, spitting coffee machine. Tallinn had been a rich city once, the picture said, with merchants in fur robes and heavy gold chains who might have had blonde, smiling daughters like

these ones. This part of the building would have been his warehouse, piled with amber and pelts, with sacks of flour or barrels of weapons. The merchant and his daughters would have lived upstairs, their windows looking out into the mist and the chimney smoke, gulls cawing from rooftops, snow flecking the thick glass.

This was how Fraser imagined Europe looked, once upon a time. The women in the picture had bread for hair: burnished yellow strands braided, twisted and woven into rolls and pretzels. Fraser stepped closer. Their hair must have been very long; they must have had maids to help them plait and pile. Their scalps must have been pin-cushions.

His own wife had short hair, which she described as low-maintenance, though it seemed to require an expensive cut and 're-touching', whatever that was, every six weeks. She went to a salon, a word that Fraser thought affected and old-fashioned, on Jervois Road. He'd met her there once, when her car was being fixed, and he'd arrived too early. The place reeked of chemicals; his wife looked like a tinfoil hedgehog. The waiting-area chairs were fake leather, sticky with sweat when he tried to stand up. He'd been offered a coffee, and it arrived with a Hershey's Kiss half-melted on the saucer. The stunted chocolate in its fussy packaging bothered him most of all, because it was American and too sweet, and not even the colour of chocolate. In a *salon*, surely they should serve bon-bons?

The hotel receptionist handed him his key, which was an actual key and not a plastic card, attached to a pale wooden doorstep. 'You should not take this out with you,' she told him. Her hair was blonde but pale and wispy, unsuitable for competitive plaiting and weaving. 'Leave it here at the desk whenever you go. Anyway, it is too heavy.'

'Yes, it is,' he said, feeling pleased at the sight of a real key, and the weight of it in his hand. He was pleased, too, to have to walk into an exposed cobbled courtyard to reach his room, and to step down two stone stairs, slick with rain, to unlock the door. The door stuck, and had to be rattled open; this pleased him as well. There was no point to Europe unless it was old and strange, creaky and quaint. Here it was fine for shops to be called salons. Here, men could wear pink jeans. Cars could be tiny enough to park sideways. Coffee could be served in tiny doll-cups. At the Christmas market down the road from his hotel, on a slanted square in the middle of the Old Town, people buying mulled wine could help themselves to a sprinkling of raisins, and take a sliver of biscuit to dunk.

In New Zealand all the biscuits would be gone in the first ten minutes. People would grab greedy handfuls of them as soon as they realised the biscuits were free. Larrikins would throw the raisins at loitering pigeons, and drink so much mulled wine they'd puke it up in the gutter. The streets around the Christmas market would be spiky with the fragments of smashed souvenir mugs, not handed back to the vendor as agreed, even though a deposit for their return had been paid.

The Three Princesses of Saxony. That was the name of the picture in the hotel lobby; the receptionist had told him when he was handing in his key en route to the Christmas market. Fraser was sure he had seen those princesses somewhere before, in some painting, in some museum, in some European city. There were so many museums in Europe, columned and echoing, built to resemble Greek temples. Castles would be better, he thought, swigging his mulled wine. Somewhere the three princesses might have lived.

They were never kicked in the face by a cow. It was much easier to be beautiful if you were rich.

The three princesses were fair-haired because they were born in northern Europe, surrounded by other fair-haired people and descended from other fair-haired people. The Mongols had yet to ride west; the Moors still lurked far to the south. Sometimes a person with brown hair would wander into their baronial hall or through their castle gates, but it's quite possible our princesses would live their entire lives without seeing someone with dark skin or black hair. They might have encounters with dwarves or witches, trolls or giants, but not with someone with brown skin and hair the colour of coal.

In any fairy tale with multiple princesses, one princess is the most beautiful of all. Sometimes it's the oldest; sometimes it's the youngest. Declaring the fifth of twelve, say, the most beautiful is too confusing for the reader or listener. Sometimes, even though the youngest princess is the most beautiful, the knight or poor guy or old soldier or whoever the heroic challenger may be in that particular fairy tale chooses the oldest sister to marry. She is the top sister, whether she's the most beautiful or not. Or perhaps she would be offended if a more junior sister was chosen. Daughters should be married off in order, especially if they are all beautiful and fair-haired, and the oldest is not over forty.

Beautiful princesses are never over forty. By that stage in their lives, they should be queens, or dowagers, or dead. If their husbands happen to die first, the women must remarry and become stepmothers, seething with jealousy because they're forced to live with their new husband's beautiful daughters. To be over forty and no longer beautiful

The stench of the nearby pen, housing bales of hay and actual live reindeer – pale and indolent, lolling against the hay – was too much for him. In this oldest of old towns, he was a visiting merchant, and it was time to go shopping.

Once upon a time there were three princesses, beautiful and fair-haired. They were beautiful for a number of reasons. First of all, the rampant inbreeding among ruling European families was still far into the future, and affections like the Habsburg jaw were unknown horrors. Second, the general standards of beauty were more expansive and forgiving. If you didn't have bad teeth or a lazy eye, you could be considered a beauty. At various points in European history different notions of what beauty was surged and ebbed – sloping shoulders, long necks, small breasts, high foreheads, rosy cheeks. And if a girl was born into a wealthy family, then the sycophants, underlings, social climbers and alliance-seekers within her family's sphere of influence would all describe her as beautiful anyway.

These particular princesses were beautiful because they were young and well-fed and spent most of their time indoors, and because sugar cane was still growing in secret across the ocean, unknown to Europeans. So their complexions were soft and unlined, their teeth and gums were healthy, and they had a lot of time for preening, grooming and hair-brushing. Their skin wasn't scorched by the sun or lashed by the wind; they didn't have to subsist on boiled potatoes. Their faces weren't gaunt with malnutrition. Their hands weren't calloused or cut from work outside. Their backs weren't twisted from hauling pails of water or digging in a field. In winter they never risked frostbite or chilblains on their feet.

is a terrible thing; revenge must be taken. Nothing good comes from outlasting a husband, or outlasting your own beauty.

Our three princesses don't know this yet. They've never thought much beyond the happy-ever-after.

Fraser needed to find a present for his wife. He'd already bought her amber earrings and a scarf, but these weren't enough. She would suspect him of buying these items in the airport: he'd been rumbled before, betrayed by a duty-free receipt. Apparently this suggested neglect and panic-buying. It suggested a generic tourist-shop approach, a sense of obligation, the dwindling of passion and respect. His wife was, overall, an intelligent and reasonable woman, but buying presents for her was fraught with peril. There was too much implicit symbolism, a symbolism Fraser never grasped until the present was handed over and the damage done. The various gift-giving days each year – Valentine's Day, their wedding anniversary, Easter Sunday, Mother's Day, her birthday, Christmas, and the return from a big business trip like this one – were his Stations of the Cross.

He'd mentioned this to her once, and it seemed to make her happy rather than penitent.

'Feeling scourged, are you?' she asked him. Then she walked down the long passageway of their house, her head thrown back, cackling.

In the Christmas market he paced the narrow aisles of stalls, looking for something that would be symbolic in the right way. Too many of the stalls were selling things that would be useless in Auckland. Fraser couldn't go home with a furry hat or a giant pair of knitted mittens: these were not things his wife would wear down

Jervois Road, not only because it was never cold enough. He couldn't buy her shot glasses featuring the Estonian flag – or, in fact, anything featuring the Estonian flag, though he thought she'd approve of the colours. She might refer to them as a colourway, which would annoy him, or a colour palette, which was almost as intolerable. When they were redecorating their bedroom, and Fraser was forced to show interest in swatches of fabric and paint shades with silly names like Mouse and Mushroom and Mist, his wife kept saying 'colourway' as though it were an actual thing, like the underpass at O'Hare Airport with the rainbow-light installation.

He couldn't buy her anything made of beeswax, like candles or soap, because these would be confiscated at Auckland Airport as a bio-security threat, and he would end up appearing on *Border Patrol*, entrapped by a sniffer dog and denounced, on national television, by uniform-wearing functionaries and a satirical voiceover. The same applied to anything resembling Christmas wreaths, or reliant on dried flowers, sea shells and feathers. His wife had no idea how stressful it was to buy her a present overseas, even before the dark cloud of symbolism descended, obscuring all his good intentions.

One stall sold Christmas decorations, and Fraser spent some time there, staring so long at all the little faces looking back at him that the stallholder began handing him things, encouraging him to inspect the goods. Most of the decorations were small carved figures – trolls with dangling knitted legs, Vikings with axes, fair-haired girls in bright skirts and fabric floral wreaths. There were three different skirt patterns, three different 'colourways'. He could buy one of each – one for his wife, one each for his two daughters, although the decorations were fair-haired and his wife and daughters were dark. Fraser would tell

them the tiny girls dangling from a shiny loop of thread reminded him of the girls in the hotel-lobby picture, *The Three Princesses of Saxony*.

Once upon a time there were three princesses, so beautiful and clever that their parents could not bear to part with them. No man in their kingdom was intelligent, handsome, brave, rich and/or important enough for them. No man was their equal. This is the fairy-tale part of this story, because in reality royal parents were unsentimental about daughters: daughters were expensive to clothe and house and tend, and their vocation was a strategic marriage followed by strategic children and then, hopefully, an early-ish death before they withered into harridans, shrews, witches, stepmothers, domineering dowagers or poison-savvy widows. Daughters were the pedigree puppies of the old world; their value lay in their sales potential.

The princesses were unhappy, because their doting parents kept them locked in a room high in the castle, hidden from the importunesses of inferior suitors. There they moped and muttered, and over-brushed each other's hair. They spent long hours devising elaborate hairstyles, braiding and pinning, twisting and piling, admiring their efforts. These were the pre-printing press days, so there were no books. Pianos were yet to be invented. There was only so much hand-sewing you could do, especially in winter when night drew in sometime in the middle of the afternoon, and the only illumination was the flicker of a candle and a smoke-spewing fireplace. The princesses wanted husbands and households of their own. Even the lowliest milkmaid in the realm had the chance to be seen and admired and kissed.

Their maid, who was brassy and over-familiar, kept them informed about social events at the castle, which mainly involved rowdy

banquets in the big hall, but the princesses were never allowed to attend these. Lesser men might try to catch their eye, to make advances or proposals. The sight of these beautiful princesses might incite men to attempt a kidnap or start a war. Because they'd been hidden away so long, the princesses were like mythical creatures; some people didn't believe they existed.

One winter morning the maid had breathless news to convey: a strange visitor had arrived at the castle late last night, not long after heavy snow had begun to fall. He was tall and broad, with brown skin as warm as a piece of amber. Deep grooves were chiselled into his face – swirls and stripes and curls, somewhere between wound and pattern. He wore his long dark hair in a high bundle, pierced with a bone comb. Into his belt he'd tucked a white-tipped black feather, plucked from a bird no one at the castle had ever seen. He was a soldier and a traveller, born in a place far beyond the forest and the mountains, across many seas. He was on his way north, to look for a ship, and needed to rest his horse until the snow settled.

The three princesses were in an uproar. They wanted to see this dark-skinned stranger with his grooved face and magic feather, but they knew their parents would never permit it. So one of the princesses wrenched back the tapestry covering the open window, and the other two grabbed the maid. They dragged her to the stone sill and pushed her out so far that she was drowning in falling snow, moments away from plummeting to the slick white cobbles many floors below.

This is how they talked the maid into helping them.

That night, when the great hall was hazy with fire smoke and heaving with people, fresh reeds crunching underfoot, torches lit, drummers pounding, deer carcasses hissing on a long spit of lashed

spears, the three princesses crept down the winding stone stairs to the kitchens. The princesses wore clothes the maid had procured for them – plain linen shifts and bright overskirts, kerchiefs tied over their heads to hide their elaborate, twisted piles of hair. The youngest sister wore a skirt patterned with pinks and yellows, the colours of spring; the middle sister wore a skirt patterned with blues and greens, the colours of summer; and the eldest sister wore a skirt patterned with russets and golds, the colours of autumn. The maid's face was white, the colour of winter, because she was afraid her collusion would be discovered and she would be put to death.

Hustled into a stone recess just beyond the hall, the three princesses waited for their moment. When the crowd fell silent, they stepped forward, though only as far as the threshold. The dark stranger had clambered onto a stool to address the assembly, and although he was standing at the far end of the hall, they could see him. He was taller than the tallest man they'd ever seen, and darker than the darkest man they'd ever seen. The white-tipped feather was tucked into his bundle of hair.

He was speaking in a language they didn't recognise, gesturing from one side of the great hall to the other. His words sounded like an incantation. The youngest princess wriggled forward, so she could see him better, and the others followed. Nobody noticed them, because everyone was looking at the dark man. His arms swept the room; his eyes swept the room. But he didn't appear to notice them either. The oldest sister, who was the most status-conscious, decided it was because they appeared too low-born and therefore unworthy of his interest. In the guise of maids, they would never attract his eye. And now she was down here, in the great hall, in the hot, throbbing heart

of her father's fiefdom, she realised that it wasn't enough to look: she wanted to be seen as well.

Without saying a word to her sisters, the oldest of the princesses untied the kerchief entrapping her hair, and let it fall to the floor. Her hair was a golden city, woven with cobbled lanes and narrow paths, arched with bridges. In the light of the flaming torch on the wall, it gleamed.

It took just a moment for the dark stranger to fall silent, and look straight at her.

The middle sister wasn't having any of this. She had the best hair of all, a castle of butter, churned and moulded into turrets and gateways, encircled by a smooth yellow moat. There was no way she could stand cowering and simpering while her older sister got all the attention. She loosened the kerchief and let it fall.

The dark stranger's mouth fell open.

Privately, the youngest sister thought she had the prettiest hair, because it was the colour of buttercups, and just as soft. She tugged off her own kerchief and flung it onto the rushes underfoot. Her hair was a meadow, a field of undulating yellow, all gentle slopes and furrows. A draught caught the tendrils around her face and they shivered like flowers in a breeze.

Everyone was looking at them now, gazing at the three princesses few had ever seen.

Their father ordered them back to their room, and the dark stranger rode away the next morning. He didn't ask to marry any of the princesses, because he already had a wife at home, and she was demanding enough. He could have stayed here, he supposed, in this northerly place and never returned home at all, but it was too cold, the food was terrible, and bears, wolves and wildcats prowled the forests.

Where he came from, there were only birds and fish, to be eaten rather than fought.

The maid was about to be put to death, so he asked for her instead, as a slave, though really he needed someone to guide him to a port. She rode with him on his horse, covered by the coarse wool of his cloak, whimpering with either fear or relief. Her hair was fair as a sand dune, fluffy like toetoe. After she led him to the coast, he gave her six pieces of jade and let her go.

Back in the hotel, Fraser lay on his bed, watching ice hockey on TV because he could understand the match, if not the commentary. He admired the speed of it, and the slamming. The players wore bright armour and helmets, like knights built from Lego.

He missed his wife. She would have devised arch things to say about the youthful hotel staff and their cult-member smiles. She would have fed raisins to the reindeer in the market.

He hoped she and the girls liked the Christmas decorations he'd bought for them, the three fair-haired maidens dangling from shiny thread. One wore a skirt patterned with pinks and yellows, the colours of spring; one wore a skirt patterned with blues and greens, the colours of summer; and one wore a skirt patterned with russets and golds, the colours of autumn. They reminded him of the three princesses – not the ones in the picture hanging in the lobby, but a different three princesses he remembered seeing, through a haze of fire smoke, lit by a blazing torch. He'd almost forgotten them, but coming here had brought pieces of it back – just pieces, because it was so long ago, and too hard to re-assemble. So long ago, it felt like another life.

Killing Ginger

ALICE TAWHAI

ENTRY 1

Dear diary, I felt that Denise was a grasping person, anyway. She grasped at me as she fell. I know I haven't written for a while, but it's time again, so let me explain. Denise was my neighbour. She wasn't important to me. And that's very important, so remember that.

Last week, I borrowed some sugar from her. I wanted to see the inside of her house. Rhombus came with me, but she didn't invite him in. He had to wait on the step. Denise had cold sores; little white-rimmed doilies on her lips, as if someone had sprinkled her mouth with battery acid. Maybe she was low in iron or something. Her eyes were light blue, and their inner light made it seem as if they'd been scorched by the sun. That should have warned me that things weren't quite right.

I caught her just as she was coming home. 'You can come inside,' she said. 'It's always unlocked.' It was hard to believe she never locked