

# The Cat's Mother

By Deborah Robinson

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## SHE WISHES FOR THE CLOTHS OF HEAVEN

*Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,  
Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
Of night, and light and the half-light;  
I would spread those cloths under your feet  
But I, being poor, have only my dreams  
I have spread my dreams under your feet,  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

*W.B Yeats (1865-1939)*

Once upon a time many days and nights ago there was a cat. He was a very fat and happy cat because he lived with a little girl. Every night he would curl up and sleep at the end of her bed and keep her feet warm. Sometimes she would wake up in the night and feel frightened, but then she would hear her cat purring in the dark and know that there was nothing to be afraid of.

But one night the little girl still couldn't sleep. She tried counting sheep but she had only ever seen them all standing together in a big flock. In the picture that formed in her mind there were too many to count; she couldn't tell which was which. She thought she would try to count the legs and then divide by four, but she had a confirmed tendency to spend her school days peacefully gazing out of the window while the children's gossiping and teacher's earnest instructions blurred into a kind of comforting murmur; she rather enjoyed window-gazing, but it wasn't a helpful preparation for attempting to divide ovine limbs in bed. Later she would discover that kangaroos were the best things for counting, because they would hop into her mind one by one, and hop straight out again. But that night the little girl still couldn't sleep, so she thought he would pay a little visit to her mother.

She liked her mother's room because one of the walls was covered with pictures and photographs of all different kinds of animals and birds from all over the world. Her favourite was a photograph of white horses running in the water. Her mother told her that they lived somewhere in France, in a place where a river became the sea. The horses were wild there and they ran around in the marshes all day. She loved to think about them

being there- splashing about all day, though she did wonder whether they minded not being able to lie down at night to sleep.

It made her think about the unicorns before the flood. She thought a lot about unicorns. She had never truly believed in Father Christmas, even before the night that she had still been awake when her mother had stealthily deposited a treat-filled stocking at the end of her bed. When the tooth fairy was discovered to originate from the same source she hadn't been surprised, or even disappointed. Fairies and old fat bearded men weren't the kind of thing that fired her imagination. She wasn't sure how she felt about magic. Magic was about tricks, tricks were lies and lying was wrong. Or at least that's what adults said when they weren't dressing up as fat bearded men in the middle of the night.

But unicorns, they seemed more like it. There had been dinosaurs and mammoths, she was told, and there were blue whales that were bigger than double-decker buses, so she found it very easy to believe in beautiful white horses with a single horn. Sometimes while she daydreamed she would remember a story that she had heard somewhere, about how when the rains started and all the other animals were being led into the ark, the unicorns wouldn't be caught. They played and splashed in the water and when the seas rose and the land was gone it was too late, the unicorns were lost. One day she had told her mother about the story, and how it made her feel sad. Of all the animals she wished it hadn't been the unicorns that had gone.

Then her mother had told her something else. There was a second part of the story, about something called evolution. Apparently animals could change from one thing into another, but it took a very long time. It must have happened more quickly for the unicorns; because they were so special anyway. When the flood came the unicorns had begun to swim. They never found the land again, but learned to live in the water. They became the Narwhales. Her mother had promised her that day that one day, when they had enough money, she would take her to see them. They would go out on a boat and if they didn't see any, they would hear them calling. It hadn't happened yet, because there wasn't any money, but the girl knew that it would one day. Her mother didn't lie about important things.

The picture on the wall that frightened her most was one of an owl, a huge terrifying owl with sharp tufts of ear-like feathers; like the horns of red devil toys in claw machines at the seaside. Though prone to getting up to various kinds of mischief in every other part of the house, she never did in her mother's room; not with the owl watching. Her mother had not yet noticed that she had spilt orange juice on the white cotton table cloth and hidden it in her secret place, but she could tell from the way the owl looked at her that it knew more than it was letting on.

Though she was pretty sure that no one knew about her secret place. It was a hollow among the roots of the big acorn tree by the hedge. She loved the acorn tree because it made her feel like she was out in the countryside. It was like the trees on old pictures, and those in fields where her Uncle Tom lived. That was where she'd seen the sheep. The hollow contained all her most private possessions, which won't be discussed here. She

wondered if the owl knew about her special place; owls knew about trees, they slept in them during the day, and owls were clever. They could spell TUESDAY.

She stealthily crossed the landing and peered into her mother's room. It was dark and she couldn't see the pictures. She could just make out her mother's dark hair spread over the white pillow, and she thought how pretty she looked, like Sleeping Beauty. But Sleeping Beauty always had yellow hair in the pictures. She couldn't understand why being in a story meant needing yellow hair. The only people with black hair were witches, with black cats. She looked quizzically at her mother in the glow of light from the hallway and wondered if she might possibly be a witch when no one was watching, but their cat was ginger and he was clever too, he would never sit somewhere so uncomfortable as on a broomstick.

She whispered very loudly in the silent room  
'MUM!'

Mum was asleep. The girl looked at her, and thought she might be having an interesting dream and not want to be interrupted, so she very quietly slipped under the duvet and cuddled up next to her. There were two flies on the glass of the window; she could just see them by the light of the street lamp, and they were buzzing. The house was quiet and the buzzing was very loud and irritating. They were trying to reach the little open window at the top, but they kept crawling the wrong way, and she couldn't reach the window to open it wider, or explain to them that if they wanted to get out they were going the wrong way about it.

'MUM!' she whispered, louder than before. Her mother sleepily turned round to face her, opened one eye and observed her daughter suspiciously.

'YOU' she exclaimed, feigning shock and horror. The girl giggled.

'You woke me up!' She yawned and opened her other eye 'I was having a dream about... never mind, what are you doing out of your bed? You know it's against the law.'

The girl looked a little bit worried, and then spoke quietly

'I couldn't sleep, and there are flies on the window and they are very annoying, they want to get out'

'Have you asked them?'

'No but I think you should let them out now and then you can make me a drink and tell me a story, otherwise I won't be able to sleep and neither will you with those flies they are very very annoying'

Her mother sleepily sat up and yawned. 'Ok then, what do you want to drink?'

'Milk and a biscuit'

'You're not having a biscuit; you can have an apple or a piece of carrot'

'Carrot'

The dark haired woman talked to herself as she directed the flies out of the window, using her hands in sheepdog-like blocking manoeuvres.

'Why was I dreaming about rabbits? It was incredible, there were hundreds of them and this wide shallow river of clear blue water, and all the rabbits were swimming down it, like that painting by William Blake, 'The River of Life', but with rabbits..' She stopped

and stared abstractedly at nothing in particular, until her daughter's voice broke through the silence.

'What *are* you talking about?

'Nothing my love, your mother is a lunatic, don't worry your pretty head about it'

A little while later they were in bed again, drinking milk and each chewing a raw carrot. 'So what kind of story would you like?' The woman asked, now awake and scanning her memory for tales that might be dull enough to send her daughter back to sleep as quickly as possible

The little girl thought for a moment..

'Er, Sleeping Beauty, but can she have brown hair like mine?'

Her mother smiled,

'Sleeping Beauty? So what do you think would happen if you were locked up asleep in a castle? Do you think a prince would come and rescue you?'

'Prince William?'

Her mother laughed.

'Prince William is eleven, I'm not sure he could hack through all those brambles and thorns...'

'I don't think he would know I was there, anyway, unless it was Windsor Castle' replied her thoughtful daughter 'He'd probably be too busy; I think you would come though.'

'Of course I would, actually that reminds me; I need to get the hedge trimmer fixed. I'll tell you something like Sleeping Beauty, but a bit different, what do you think?'

'Are you going to make it up as you go along?'

'Yes'

'Good, I like those ones'

She cuddled up close to her mother and looked out of the window so she couldn't see the devilish outline of the owl that knew her secrets. Her mother started at the beginning.

'Once upon a time, before there were cars or fish fingers or aeroplanes...'

'Were there rabbits?'

'Yes, but only brown ones, and they probably ended up as rabbit stew, not living in a hutch like yours...'

'Did they eat snails too? And guinea pigs?'

'No, I don't know, stop interrupting!'

'Sorry'

'Don't be sorry. Ok, it was a very very long time ago, when the whole country was filled with grass and trees and meadows and little villages of peasants...'

'I've seen them at Uncle Tom's'

'What? Peasants? Her mother laughed. 'That's a bit rude! There aren't any peasants anymore.'

The little girl was indignant.

'Yes there are! Uncle Tom told me, they go out with dogs and shoot them and the dogs bring them back, and Uncle Tom said that he went once but his dog didn't like the noise of the guns and ran home and hid in the cupboard and he felt like a prat.'

'Ha!' replied her mother, 'That'll teach him to go shooting. He was talking about pheasants- birds; peasants were very poor people a long time ago.'

So, back to the story, pay attention. Ages ago the whole of Norfolk was lovely fields and grass, and in the middle was a huge castle with thick stone walls, great high towers, and a drawbridge. Can you imagine it?

'Yes'

'Good. Well outside the castle was a meadow, known as Castle Meadow, where the peasants lived and worked. They sold jumpers and socks that they made from the wool from their sheep. They farmed the land around the castle and they lived in little houses with straw roofs, and in the evening they would all sit around a big fire and eat rabbit stew and vegetables'

'They weren't vegetarians?'

'No, I can't tell stories and answer your incessant questions at the same time. I am your mother; I am not an encyclopaedia.'

The little girl was silent for a moment, but there was a question burning in her mind and she had to let it out.

'What is an encyclopaedia?'

She didn't find out the answer to this query because she found herself being hit over the head repeatedly with a cushion and collapsing into a fit of giggles- forgetting all about vegetarians and encyclopaedias. Her mother saw that sleep was becoming a dimmer prospect by the minute, and decided to try to entertain herself by concocting as ridiculous a story as possible. When the giggling child had finally shut up, she continued.

'In the village lived a young woman called Leonora Benwick.'

'That's like my... ' interrupted the girl excitedly.

'Yes it is, now stop interrupting or I'll change it. Being quiet? Good, I'll carry on.'

Leonora had a job collecting apples and pears from the orchard. One day she had climbed a tree to reach the apples right at the top, and was sitting on the very highest branch; filling her basket and eating the apples while no-one was looking. She looked up at one of the castle towers and saw through the window that someone was walking from one end of the room to the other, back and forth, back and forth, and they didn't seem very happy. Then she heard them shouting.

**'THE KING DOES'NT LIKE MORRIS DANCERS! I DON'T CARE IF YOU'VE JUST BOUGHT NEW HANDKERCHIEFS! AND WE'RE NOT SERVING HIM RABBIT STEW! I WANT A ROAST OX BY TOMMOROW MORNING OR YOU'LL BE ON PRIVY DUTIES UNTIL CHRISTMAS! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME? SO GO AND GET ONE! NOW YOU MORON!'**

The little girl laughed at her mother's angry voice. Her mother continued;

'So, Leonora had been listening with interest when suddenly a pair of arms appeared at the window and hurled a huge pot of stew out. It whizzed past her head, almost knocking her out of the tree, and it covered her pretty white dress in gravy and bits of turnip. Well

as I'm sure you can imagine, she was absolutely furious with the grumpy young man for ruining her dress, and decided there and then to climb up the ivy (she was very good at climbing) and let him know exactly what she thought of him.

Though of course she had to get changed first, so she borrowed a pair of her brother's trousers and tied her hair back in case it got caught up in the twigs. The tower was very difficult to climb, and scarily high up at the top, but she was determined to tell him off. Eventually she got to the window and climbed in, still feeling very cross indeed. When she looked into the furthest dark corner of the room, she saw the young man was sitting at a desk in front of a huge pile of parchment and quills. The room was littered with screwed up parchment and broken plates that he had smashed against the wall in his frustration.'

'What is parchment and quills?' asked the little girl.

'Paper and pens, except the pens were made from feathers.'

The papers were covered in writing, and Leonora saw that the young man's eyes were tired and sad. Suddenly she stopped feeling angry, but wanted to know why he was so unhappy. It was a beautiful day outside and she couldn't think that there was anything to be miserable about. Then he spoke to her in an angry tone of voice.

'WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN MY TOWER BOY?'

The little girl -who was becoming quite interested in the story- gasped and began to feel cross herself. If anybody mistook her for a boy she would hit them over the head, and it wouldn't be with a cushion.

'Leonora was mightily offended by this affront on her femininity' continued her mother, 'and she untied her hair which flowed in a cascade of rich brownness over her shoulders and down her back. The young man saw then that she wasn't a boy; in fact she was a very beautiful girl. He also thought that he recognised her, and asked her;

'Are you Leonora Benwick?'

Leonora was suspicious, and was feeling very unimpressed with him again. She spoke with great dignity;

'How do you know my name you irritating man? You almost hit me with that pot of stew! You think you can just throw stew out of windows and to hell with the consequences? I was sitting in a tree- I could have been killed! I respectfully demand an apology'

She frowned at him, but somehow thought that she recognised his face, which had softened while watching her talk so spiritedly. There was a faint smile on his lips as he noticed that there was a large sprig of ivy on top of her head.

'I didn't mean to kill you' he said softly, 'Don't you remember me? I'm Arthur of Earlham, son of Lord Huntsalot.'

She did remember him. They used to play together in the orchard when they were children. She would lead his pony under low branches to knock him off, and he would show her beautiful fish in the stream, and then wait until she leaned over to look closely

at them and push her in. laughing heartily to himself. He was greatly changed now though. He had been away for many years, fighting and flirting with foreign women, and he had grown into a tall and fine-looking young man.

She was beginning to become very interested in him, so she asked him why he was up in the tower being grumpy on such a nice morning. Arthur saw that as well as being very pretty and brave-climbing all the way up the tower- she also had a kind face and seemed to want to help him. She sat quietly and listened carefully (which is a great skill and one worth learning) while he told her all about the sticky situation he had found himself in.

He explained to her that the King (who was very old and fat and grumpy and he didn't like one little bit) was coming to visit the castle the following day, and Arthur's father had gone out hunting and left him to make all the arrangements- in fact he had locked the door to the tower and was threatening not to let his son out until all the work was done. Lord Huntsalot was widely known to be an apple short of a crumble, and Leonora feared for Arthur's own sanity living under such conditions.

A further complication, Arthur explained, was that the King was bringing his daughter with him; who by all accounts was most disagreeable. Absolutely the worst thing of all for Arthur was that one evening recently the King and Lord Huntsalot had got drunk together in the snug of The Merry Pig and decided that Arthur should marry the princess, whose name was...'

'What?'

'I'm thinking...'

'Sophie Atkins. She was Cinderella in the school play and I hate her.'

'ok, so the King had decided that Arthur had to marry Cinderella, I mean Sophie, and was soberly threatening to put *him* on a spit instead of the ox if he showed any signs of refusing.

'Ooooh'

'Ooooh indeed'

Leonora felt very sorry for him, that really was enough to spoil a beautiful spring day, she realised, and forgave him for covering her in stew; anyway some of it had tasted quite nice. She asked him if there as anything she could do to help, and he told her that what he really needed was someone who could embroider with gold thread. They had bought a special sparkling white table cloth for the King's banquet, and it had to be embroidered with golden flowers and birds and suchlike before Princess Sophie would sit at the table.

'You see what a nightmare she will be to live with?!' Said Arthur in dismay. He then explained to her that the problem was that most of the women in the castle couldn't sew on a button, let alone manage fine embroidery; they preferred gossiping and practicing highland games, and Sophie had demanded that only a beautiful young woman with slender fingers should undertake the task.

Leonora felt disappointed. She was very good at archery and making apple pie, but she had never embroidered so much as a sock in her life before. She examined her fingers

and they didn't look particularly slender, then she put her quick mind to work and inspiration struck. She told Arthur that she would do what she could to help him and began to climb back down the ivy. Arthur asked her if she knew anything about Morris Dancers, and she told him not to push his luck. He politely called out to her that perhaps she might prefer to use the stairs, but she had already disappeared.

That afternoon Leonora Benwick put on her best light green cotton dress and washed her hands in the stream, so they were clean and pretty, if not slender. She even picked daisies in the meadow for her hair, and she looked lovely. In the evening, when the Lord of the castle had returned from his long sweaty day's hunting, she appeared in the courtyard, and found the lord talking to his horse about the weather. She thought this was a little odd, but decided not to comment on it. She approached the Lord and addressed him respectfully.

'I am come from the wondrous city of Ippleswitch' she said, 'Many miles away, where young ladies practice embroidery night and day, and never soil their fingers with housework or arm-wrestling. I am the finest embroiderer in our fine city and I come to humbly beg for the honour of decorating Princess Sophie's cloth.'

'The Lord was mightily impressed, and threw his arms around his horse and gave it a lingering kiss on the head. Then he shuffled off to fetch the cloth and thread.

'Have you brushed your teeth?' the storyteller asked.

'What?'

'Teeth! Have you brushed them yet?'

'No, how does she do the sewing?'

'You promise you'll do them when the story's finished?'

'I promise'

'Right well Leonora took the cloth and went to find her friend Bernard the Turnip Peeler who, though exceptionally large and hairy, had a magnificent talent for sewing tapestries. He had learned it from his grandmother, but liked to keep it under his hat. She had once caught him at it when she had accidentally interrupted him in the privy, and he had sworn her to secrecy, threateningly brandishing a turnip-knife. It was a bit of a risky business, asking for his help, but luckily he had a great weakness for Leonora's cooking, and agreed to help her in return for a very large apple pie and two flagons of cider.

That night, under the cover of darkness and a large tent, Leonora and Bernard sat together under the stars in the furthest part of the orchard. Bernard's short fat hairy fingers moved over the cloth like the silver moths fluttering by the light of the campfire. Leonora re-filled his cider mug and fed him vast slices of apple pie, occasionally looking up at the dark distant tower. Once or twice she thought she glimpsed the shadow of a figure in the window...'

'Did they have custard?' asked the little girl 'with the apple pie?'

'Yes' replied her mother, pleased that she was still listening, and wondering herself how the story was going to end.

'But they didn't have fish fingers?'

'Well no, not with apple pie...'

'But did they have them in general?'

'I don't think so, though Captain Birdseye is very very old, I agree. I'm going to carry on now before I forget what I'm talking about...'

So, at last Leonora drifted off to sleep. When the first light of the dawn crept over the meadow and the multitude of songbirds began their incessant twittering, she opened her eyes to the incredible sight of the vast expanse of pure white cloth laid out across the lush meadow grass, like a wide clear river edged with exquisite flowers, birds and fishes; depicted in elaborate trails of shining golden thread. There were daisies, wild roses and all kinds of dragonflies, butterflies and birds....'

'Pheasants?'

'Yes'

'Leonora was amazed and delighted, and woke Bernard the Turnip Peeler, who was slumped against a tree, snoring loudly and smelling pungently of cider. Bernard didn't seem to be in the best of moods, and concealed his sewing kit under his hat before ambling off muttering something about two hundred turnips, his back and taking the secret to the grave or else. Leonora thanked him anyway and had some porridge for breakfast, before tidying herself up and proudly taking the beautiful cloth to Arthur.'

The castle was being decorated for the Royal visit, and she felt like a princess herself as she laid out the cloth before an anxious Arthur. Leonora noticed that the carpet was worn thin in a circle around the room. Well of course Arthur of Earlham was relieved and delighted when he saw the incredible cloth. He sat down and laughed and looked at Leonora as though she were an angel sent specially from heaven to save him from roasting on the spit. He wondered too if she could save him from the similarly terrifying prospect of marriage to Sophie. She told him that the work had been done by a friend who wished to remain unknown for personal reasons. Arthur was convinced that she had done the work herself, and was touched by her modesty.'

The little girl was growing tired. The room kept falling out of focus and her eyelids weighed more than two hundred turnips.

'So does he marry her in the end?' she asked, yawning and letting her eyes close. Her mother stroked the little girl's hair, turned to face her and continued very quietly.

'Well, Arthur was now even more determined that he was not going to marry Sophie Atkins under any circumstances. In fact he really felt he might be falling in love with Leonora, and felt sorry that he had pushed her in the stream so often. He was summoning up the courage to inform her of this interesting development when there was a nerve shattering crash and the heavy oak door burst open to reveal the formidable form of his father and his noble steed Sir Arkle, whom the Lord had ridden all the way up the winding tower staircase, forgetting to consider how he was going to get down again.'

The two girls laughed at the silly image of a horse stuck up a tower, then the elder one continued.

'Lord Huntsalot demanded all the details of what his son had managed to achieve, and Arthur explained that the Morris Dancers were incredibly offended that their services were not required and that as fate would have it the only person for miles around with a roast ox going spare was Elwyn Beardcrumple, the dancer's head artistic director. The only course of action Arthur could see was to make a humble apology to the aforementioned Mr Beardcrumple and hope that relations could be restored and that the ox was still available.

While the Lord was pondering this tricky situation his eyes fell upon the embroidered cloth, which was glinting brightly by the window in the morning sunshine. He asked Leonora if it was all her own work, and of course she had to say that it was, having earlier claimed to be an expert from Ippleswitch. The Lord was so impressed that he declared loudly that she must attend the banquet, in fact by Jove she must be seated at the King's table next to Princess Sophie and tell the fair filly all about how she did it and whatnot. Now Leonora was more than a little worried about this, but she couldn't very well say so.

Leonora and Arthur spent the rest of the morning exercising their skills in the art of persuasion in Elwyn Beardcrumple's rather rustic dance studio. At last Elwyn conceded that the dancers would perform, on the condition that he and the members of his group would each get a seat at the king's table in order to make amends for the earlier indignity and because it was his roast ox anyway. Arthur agreed that this was entirely reasonable, and Leonora had all the arrangements made.

Soon the castle was sparking clean and decorated with banners and flags in honour of the king. The children wore ribbons and waited for the princess to arrive in order to present their gifts of flowers and hand-knitted sheep's wool socks. Leonora had luckily managed to dissuade one little boy from presenting her with his entire long- treasured worm collection.

King's carriages arrived and the people clapped and cheered. Musicians played their lutes and banjos and everyone was dressed in their very best clothes, even the bearded ladies had been allowed to shave just this once. Everyone except Leonora, that is. She had been so busy sorting out everybody else's problems that she had no time to even borrow a clean dress to wear to the banquet. She only had two and one was covered in stew and the other in flour from baking pies for Bernard.

Before she knew it the trumpets were sounding and the assembled dignitaries were sitting down for the feast. She hadn't even time enough to brush her hair, and though she didn't know it, she had a smear of flour on her nose. So I'm sure you can imagine how she must have felt when she took her seat next to Sophie.

The princess was dressed immaculately in white silk, with pearls around her neck and inlaid into her dress, and masses of shining blonde curls. Her eyes were as blue as the cloudless sky above the castle, and her teeth were yet another perfect row of pearls. Leonora saw that Arthur was seated opposite them looking magnificently handsome and impressive in his finest attire. Leonora looked down at her dress and felt terribly ashamed. Before long the ox was carried in, steaming and glazed and delicious-looking, along with steaming silver plates of vegetables, roast chickens and geese and an enormous Yorkshire pudding.'

At this point the little girl couldn't help interrupting.

'Mum, why are we vegetarian?'

Her mother laughed.

'Because we love animals more than we love dinner, do you agree with me?'

The girl considered for a moment then confirmed that she did indeed agree. Her mother smiled and resumed her story.

'Well the King had also made a contribution to the feast, he had recently returned from a royal visit to Spain, and had returned with many boxes of remarkable new orange coloured fruits, known as *oranges*. The company were served lovely fresh orange juice in clay cups. Everyone in and around the castle was having a lovely time, and the standard of the king, who Leonora agreed really was exceptionally fat, was flying high in the early afternoon breeze. There was much gossip and merriment, but everyone was quiet when the Princess spoke to Leonora, except the king, who didn't shut up for anyone. He had even been known to interrupt the pope in conversation.

'You simply must tell me all about this embroidery my dear' Sophie said 'it's absolutely divine. My ladies in waiting don't produce nearly such fine work, even when I threaten to get daddy to throw them in the moat- that is funny, watching them splash about. I had no idea that there was such a flourishing artistic community in Ippleswitch, or indeed that there was any such place, sometimes I forget that I don't know everything!' She giggled irritatingly. Leonora shuddered and took a long swig of O.J.

'I must say, though,' continued Sophie, 'If all the girls in Ippleswitch dress like you I really don't think I shall be going there, its almost as bad as those terrible woollen socks they make here!'. Sophie then turned her attention to Arthur, gazing at him from under her long eyelashes.

'Sophie is a ...' exclaimed the little girl, feeling outraged.

'Yes she is' confirmed her mother. '-Leonora thought so too...

Leonora felt her cheeks becoming hot and she fought hard against the shamingly childish tears which were threatening to cause her further humiliation. She looked up at Arthur, who had heard every word, and was looking inscrutably at Sophie in her beautiful white dress. Leonora felt her hurt feelings changing to an intense anger, much worse than when Arthur had almost killed her with stew. She only prevented herself from pushing Sophie's face in her dinner by holding on very tightly to her mug of orange juice.

At that moment, however, Sophie giggled and cast a longing glance in Arthur's direction, and Leonora snapped. She gripped her mug so tightly that it broke in her hand, *spilling orange juice all over the white table cloth!*

At that moment the little girl, who had been beginning to feel sleepy, opened her eyes wide and froze like a rabbit in car headlights. Her mother was silent for a long moment, making every effort not to laugh, then in a very normal voice she continued.

'So of course the whole court went silent, staring at the destruction wrought upon Sophie's cloth by the very person who had created it, or so they thought. The lute players stopped and fifty pairs of eyes and the single eye of One-Eyed Dave the Morris Dancing Carpenter were fixed on Leonora. By this time she really had had enough, and she lost the goddamn plot. She turned to Sophie, twitching with suppressed anger.

*'Ok Miss Goldilocks Fancy-Pearls Turd Brain Moron!' she shouted, at the same time wondering where in her mind those strange insults had come from, 'You want the truth? You can't handle the truth, but I'm going to tell it to you anyway, because no one else here will!'*

One hundred and one eyes stared at her in disbelief, and Leonora felt light-headed, but it was too late to stop now. She mastered herself and spoke with great force and dignity.

*'I didn't embroider the cloth, and I'm not from Ippleswitch. I live in a hut in the village here and my father is Roger Benwick the Ciderman, also known as Belching Roger. The reason I look like this is because I've spent all day helping Arthur, because he is my friend Your rudeness to me is nothing to what he will have to suffer, being married to you, you know he doesn't want to, but he has to, all because your FAT father says so!*

Leonora froze. She had called the King of Albion FAT. She had let slip that she didn't want Arthur to marry Sophie. She waited for the ground to open and swallow her up but it was taking its time about it. The stunned King dropped his parsnip-laden spoon on to the tablecloth, making matters worse. Sophie squealed and rushed from the table. Arthur sat looking gobsmacked and Belching Roger belched.

'So who did make the cloth?' asked Lord Huntsalot in amazement. He was easily confused and today he couldn't see the wood for the trees, nor the trees for the squirrels. All eyes were again on Leonora and for the first time she noticed that Bernard was sitting among the morris dancers, attempting to conceal his reddening face behind a tambourine. She didn't want to reveal his secret, but she couldn't lie to the king, not after having called him FAT.

The sight of Bernard looking so embarrassed made her angry. Why should he be ashamed of his marvellous talent? She wondered, and who was to say that pretty girls should have slender fingers and never speak their minds? She had a mind and she was not afraid to use it.

'You really want to know who embroidered the cloth?' she asked, and the crowd cried 'Yea!' with one voice.

'It was Bernard! The man has short, fat hairy fingers but he sews like an angel'  
'BERNARD?' they cried in astonishment.

Bernard himself looked philosophically at his short fat hairy fingers, and realised to his surprise that for perhaps the first time in his life he was feeling very proud of himself. Leonora had shown him what it was to be brave, and he took his hat off to her, and got his sewing kit out. Leonora smiled broadly at him, and gave him a curtsey him brought her as much pleasure as doing the same before the princess had brought her pain. Then she looked at Arthur. She couldn't tell what he was thinking until he stood up to his full height, holding all one hundred and one eyes in his thrall.

'ENOUGH!' he shouted, and turned first to Bernard. 'Well done Bernard, it is a fine piece of work. I believe a promising career could be waiting for you in the court of my friend King Robert of Jamaica, if you would like to you may accompany me there, I will be leaving tonight.'

Leonora's heart sank. Her only friends were leaving and the King was going to throw her in the moat for calling him fat. She could see it in his eyes. Then to her delight she saw that Arthur was smiling at her. He took hold of her hand and led her outside in to the quiet of the orchard where they had played together so long ago. Now everything had changed, and it was about to change a lot more. Arthur knelt down by the stream and looked up earnestly at Leonora.

'You know, he said, I only pushed you in the stream so often because I liked you so much. This is your home but it is my prison, my father loves his horse more than me and I've worn a circle in the carpet. I humbly ask you to come away with me as my wife. We won't be seeing Sophie anymore. She has left.'

Leonora grinned with excitement,  
'Jamaica?' she exclaimed.

'No, replied Arthur in all seriousness. Johnny Woolton was chasing her with his worm collection. I last saw her disappearing over that hill.'

Arthur pointed into the distance and they looked out together over the fields, each seeing a world full of all kinds of new possibilities. They left that very day with Bernard, who lessened the romance of the occasion a little but knew a lot of rude jokes that Leonora found very entertaining, and he could do wonders on the camp stove with a few turnips; though now he chose to be known to all as Bernard of the Dancing Fingers, a title which caused a few young ladies a little nervousness before they understood its meaning.

Before he left the village, Bernard had cut up his exquisite cloth in to many small pieces, (throwing away the orange stained bit) and given one to every child in the village. Though he and Arthur and Leonora were never seen again in the town, they were talked of for many years, and the inspired children of Castle Meadow became as famous for their fine embroidery as the fabled ladies of Ippleswitch... THE END.

. So what did you think?' The storyteller asked her daughter. But the little girl's eyes were closed and her breathing slow. She was asleep, but her mother thought that she could just make out the faintest of smiles on her lips. Feeling a bit of a fool for having been telling a story to herself without realising it, she picked up the sleeping child and carried her back into her own room, where her faithful ginger cat still slept. The little girl never did hear the end of the story, but the next morning she woke up very early and removed the white tablecloth from her secret place, where it had become a luxurious temporary home for a thriving community of earwigs. She scrubbed it in the bath, using far too much washing liquid, and hung it out on the washing line where it dried quickly in the sweet spring air. Her mother smiled to herself when she saw it, and that night, when her daughter was sleeping soundly in the next room, she lay in bed drinking tea and thinking. Before she switched off her light she noticed out of the corner of her eye that there was a small space on her wall of pictures, where the head of an Eagle Owl used to be, and vaguely wondered why.