

THE SALT PRINCESS

An original fairy tale inspired by Shakespeare's *King Lear*
and a folk tale found in many different cultures

By Patricia Herzog
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For Frankie and Sasha

King Lear had three daughters. Cordelia was good and kind. She loved the King not because he was a king but because he was her father. Goneril and Regan loved their father because they wanted a share of his kingdom.

The King was very old and not entirely in his right mind. It was time for someone else to rule. But who? A wizard lived in a nearby cave. "What shall I do?" the King asked him. "A queen will reign one day," the wizard told him. "Is now the time?" the King wondered. "Whoever loves you and not your Kingdom will inherit the throne," replied the wizard.

The King asked his daughters if they loved him. Goneril and Regan gushed at their father: "Most gracious Lord! You are the sun and the moon and the stars! You are finer than the finest gold!" All Cordelia could think to say was that she loved her father like salt.

The King was angry when he heard Cordelia's words. What, after all, is salt? Nothing fine or fancy. Not at all precious. He put a curse on his daughter: "Let not another word come out of your mouth!" After that, Cordelia could not speak. He ordered her from his sight, saying he never wanted to see her again. "Go and live with your beloved salt!"

Cordelia went to live in the King's salt mine deep under the ground. Everything there was salt: the walls, the floor, the steep steps leading to the entrance high above. The salt was hard like a rock. It wasn't the kind you pour out of a shaker.

Two miners with pick axes extracted the salt. A quiet man, Clarence, swept up after the miners and tended to the Princess. Cordelia sat all day sifting salt through her long pale fingers. She never said a word—not, that is, until true love's kiss would lift the King's curse. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Every day the miners struck at the hard rocky salt and every night they went home exhausted. The rock barely yielded. No matter how hard they worked, there was never enough salt.

Back in the palace, the King gave a banquet to celebrate his 90th birthday. "Dearest Father," Goneril and Regan gushed, "What a marvelous feast you have prepared! The food is tasty and delicious." The King took one bite and knew that his daughters were lying. Without salt, the food tasted like nothing at all.

The King couldn't have imagined how important salt was until there wasn't enough of it. It was salt, you see, that kept his food from rotting. "My soldiers are starving!" he cried out with alarm. "Soon there won't be anyone left to defend the kingdom!"

The very next day the miners returned and found big salty chunks lying on the ground. "Hurray!" they cried. "Our efforts are finally paying off!" The day after that they returned and found even more salt. Every day there was more and more salt. The miners made a few strikes with their axes. Then they sat around and chattered while Clarence hauled heavy buckets of salt. It was very hard work.

One day the miners struck at some specially hard salt. Their axes got stuck in the wall. That night they went home fretting: "Tomorrow, there won't be any salt!" The next morning they arrived and were amazed to find the axes loosed and huge salty chunks lying on the ground. "How could this be?" they wondered, scratching their heads.

The miners struck again and again their axes got stuck. "Was it you who did this?" they asked Clarence. The quiet man shook his head no. "Tell us the truth!" they demanded. Clarence didn't answer. One of the miners picked up a rock: "Tell us what you did or we'll knock you down!"

The Princess saw that Clarence was in danger. She got up and went to the wall, loosed both axes, then lifted one of them high above her head. With tremendous force she brought it down exactly where the miners had struck. Chunks of salt started coming apart from the wall. "It was the Princess!" the miners exclaimed. Now they knew the truth. All along it was the Princess who had been mining the King's salt!

The King was happy with all his salt. The miners were happy, too. They lazed around and took the credit while Cordelia did all the work. The Princess devised a system of pulleys to lift the salt up and out of the mine. Clarence no longer hauled heavy buckets. He had plenty of spare time and there was plenty of spare salt, which he liked to carve.

Clarence was a very able carver. No rock was too small, no wall too big or corner too dark that he didn't find some way of working it with his chisel. Little by little, almost imperceptibly, the quiet man turned the dark drab mine into a dazzling palace of salt! Everywhere you looked there were candelabras and chandeliers, lifelike statues, friezes and bas reliefs carved into walls. An elaborate fountain was fed by an underground stream. Last but not least, Clarence carved a magnificent bed for Cordelia.

The King's mine was acclaimed now throughout the land. "How does he do it?" everyone wanted to know. The King liked talking about his mine, but soon he ran out of things to say. "How do I do it?" he wondered. "I must go and find out." The King arranged to visit the mine the very next day.

The miners saw the King and trembled. They feared he would learn the truth. The King descended the steps and looked around. He could hardly believe his eyes! "How did my mine become a palace of salt?" he wondered. The miners bowed low. "Most Gracious Sire!" they said. "We are your humble servants." The miners put on their helmets. It was time to show the King how the mine worked.

Just then the King saw a man standing to the side. He had a chisel in his hand. "Was it you who did all this?" he inquired. Clarence nodded and bowed low. The King turned to the miners. "Hats off, gentlemen! A genius!" he cried. The King started examining Clarence's carvings. The miners were glad. They hoped the King would continue looking at the carvings and forget all about them.

The King stopped and stared at a statue. "Why look, it's me!" he cried with delight. That is when Cordelia crept out of her room and into a dark corner. She feared her father's anger. And that is when Clarence, quiet as a mouse, walked over to the pulleys and unhooked them.. "The miners shouldn't get credit," he thought, "for work they didn't do."

At last, the King turned to the miners. "How do you do it?" he wanted to know. Reluctantly the miners led the King to the pulleys. They pulled on the ropes and nothing happened. They pulled again and still nothing happened. The King was angry. "Why weren't the pulleys working?" he wanted to know. The miners were silent. They didn't know how the pulleys worked. That is when they turned on Clarence. "Look what you did!" they cried, threatening him with an ax.

The Princess saw that Clarence was in danger. She stepped out of the shadows and walked over to the pulleys. A simple adjustment, a pull on the ropes: the pulleys were working! The miners were terrified. They raced up the steps and out of the mine. They fled the Kingdom and were never seen again.

The King didn't know that the woman at the pulleys was Cordelia. He didn't recognize his daughter, much less remember his having sent her to a salt mine. He did know, however, that the woman at the pulleys did all the mining. "Brava!" he cried. "Well done!"

The King had seen the mining and the carvings. Now it was time to go. He knew he would have lots to say when he got back to the palace!

After the King's visit, Cordelia and Clarence lived in the mine in peace.

Clarence loved Cordelia. Every day in secret he would pour his heart out to a likeness of her that he had secretly carved. Then one day he kissed it: "Were I were a prince and not a plain man, I'd kiss you, like this. Were I a prince and not a plain man, my kiss would lift the curse and we'd both speak of love."

No sooner had Clarence kissed Cordelia's likeness than the Princess emerged from her room. She looked for all the world as if something important had happened. Cordelia stood before Clarence and held out her arms. Clarence simply bowed. It wasn't the place of a plain man to show a princess love.

Cordelia knew Clarence loved her. "By now," she thought, "he knows I love him, too." Again she held out her arms. Again Clarence bowed. "No words?" she said. "Have you no words for me?"

Cordelia spoke! Could it really be? Had Clarence's kiss lifted the King's curse? No matter. The plain man still felt that it wasn't his place to show the Princess his love.

That is when Cordelia flew into a rage. "The King shall have no more salt!" she cried, slashing the pulleys with her razor-sharp ax. "Get out!" she screamed at Clarence. "Lock me in and throw away the key!" Poor Clarence! He felt had no choice but to obey. So he left the mine and sealed it up for good.

Clarence went to the palace. "Gracious Sire," he said, "Soon you will have no more salt. Let me try to find another way to keep your food from rotting." The King remembered the carver as a man of genius and was glad to accept his offer. "I have faith in you!" he said.

Clarence placed a juicy ripe plum in a big block of ice. He let many days pass. Then he stuck in his thumb and pulled out the plum. He could tell it was still ripe. "Delicious!" cried the King when he tasted it. Who besides Clarence could ever have imagined that freezing food kept it from rotting?

The King was very grateful—indeed, so grateful that he granted Clarence the noble title of baron. Baron Clarence wasn't a plain man anymore!

Goneril and Regan were jealous of Clarence. They feared their father liked him more than he liked them. "Why is there no more salt?" they wanted to know. "You were in the mine. Tell us!" The daughters hoped the King would think less well of Clarence. Never could they have imagined what would happen next.

"Bring her to me!" the King cried. Clarence was silent. "Bring the maiden to me!" he insisted. That is when Clarence told the truth. "Most gracious sire," he said, "the maiden in the mine is your daughter Cordelia."

"Liar!" Goneril and Regan shot back. "Our sister lives far away. She has forsaken us all!" "Sire," Clarence repeated, "the maiden in the mine is your daughter Cordelia." The King shook his head in confusion: "If she is there, then why are you here?" "No words," said Clarence, repeating what Cordelia had told him. "She said I had no words."

"No words" the King repeated slowly. He grew so still that it looked as though he were no longer breathing. Then all at once he blurted out: "No words! No words! T'was I who said the very same to her!" The King turned to Clarence with tears in his eyes: "Bring me my daughter!"

The Princess was unhappy in her palace of salt. Every day, every hour, every minute was the same. "How I long to breathe fresh air," she sighed, "to see the light of day and feel the warmth of the sun." Cordelia prayed to the gods to let her out. She prayed and prayed, but the gods didn't answer.

That is when she picked up her axe and hacked to pieces everything in sight: the statues, the chandeliers, the fountain, her bed, the walls. So forcefully did she strike that soon the axes were broken. "A hammer! A chisel! Anything will do" Cordelia searched for Clarence's chisel and came upon her likeness. "Ah, he loved!" she cried out. Clarence

showed his love not in words but with the very carvings she had just destroyed!

Just then a deafening sound filled the mine. It was like the loudest clap of thunder you ever heard. Fault lines crisscrossed the walls. Huge chunks of salt came crashing down. "My God! What have I done?" Cordelia cried. The mine was crumbling! Salt was flying everywhere. The Princess couldn't breathe. Rubble was piling higher and higher. She scrambled up the steps. At the very top she heard a pounding. The mine opened! Just in time Clarence reached in pulled Cordelia out.

Cordelia's reunion with her father was filled with emotion. The old man knew he had been wrong to send his daughter away. What could be more important than salt? He apologized and she forgave him. Cordelia saw Clarence and apologized for sending him away. Cordelia was very happy when Clarence forgave her.

Princess Cordelia and Baron Clarence were married. Fittingly, and in accordance with an ancient rite, the King consecrated their marriage with salt. Everyone rejoiced, except Goneril and Regan.

The King was very old. It was time for someone else rule. But who? The King's thoughts turned to Clarence: "He told the truth and saved my men from starvation." He had forgotten the wizard, you see.

The day arrived when a new King was to be crowned. Poor Clarence was unhappy. He really was just a plain man at heart. What would he do with all that power? Cordelia was unhappy, too. Much as she loved her husband, she knew he wasn't the ruling kind.

Clarence went to put on his royal robes, leaving Cordelia alone with her father. "Dearest daughter," the King said solemnly, "Your husband is soon to be King. What do you think about that?" Cordelia thought for a moment, and here is what she said: "Did not the wizard say one day a queen would reign?" The King suddenly remembered. "He did," he said. "And is the queen not a woman?" continued Cordelia. "She is," said the King. "And did not I, the Salt Princess, keep your men from starving?" The King nodded in assent. "Then why not give your Kingdom to me?" The King had a thoughtful look on his face. He was not angry. He did not send Cordelia away.

The trumpets were sounding as Clarence stepped into the great hall. The King saw his son-in-law in royal dress and had to suppress a frown. Clarence looked out of place. The King stepped forward with the royal scepter in his hands. He turned to face Cordelia:

“To my daughter, Cordelia ...
Faithful and most able ...
My kingdom I bequeath.
May you rule ...
In wisdom and in peace.”

Clarence bowed low, acknowledging the King’s wise decree.

“Queen Cordelia!” the King continued ...
“May the gods grant you favor ...
And salt enough to give life savor.”

From that day on, Queen Cordelia ruled the realm in wisdom and in peace. She lived happily with her husband Prince Clarence and their two little girls, Princess Frances and Princess Sasha, who grew up to be strong and wise like their mother.

THE END