

Happily Ever After

Do you recall those stories we were told when we were children? Those fantastic tales, full of magic and adventure, princesses and knights, witches and dragons, grand journeys and terrible perils? Perhaps you've even told them to your children, or to your grandchildren, too.

Sometimes, in those stories, sometimes the heroes were special people. Perhaps not necessarily exceptional people, but special people. Noble knights who have proven their valour in battle after battle. Princes and princesses, the seventh son of the seventh son, the third daughter of the third daughter. Sons and daughters of gods, gifted with powers, or even gods themselves.

And sometimes, the heroes were just regular people. Sons and daughters of farmers, millers, fishers, and potters. Siblings looking after each other, a boy stumbling upon a magic lamp, a girl stumbling upon a magic sword. They all knew hardship and struggle, the bitter bite of hunger and cold, poverty and despair, the taste of their sweat and hard work. And then, then they were thrown into the story the same way a newborn is thrown into life – from one moment to the next, they were there, in it, unknowing and clueless, crying and kicking and screaming, but there nonetheless. And just as the grains of sand drop into their neat little heap, just as the wheel turns on its axle, so does a newborn's life go on to become something beautiful and amazing, and so does a story unfold, hurtling towards its end.

We all know how the stories went. They would all struggle harder and rougher than ever before. They would all face insurmountable obstacles. They would all face terror and death. Some had to go on perilous journeys and dangerous adventures, some had to slay dragons and hellhounds and to fight evil wizards, some had to outsmart foul demons, to out-trick cunning devils. It was always incredibly dif-

ficult. It was always nearly impossible. Failure and death were always nearby, but a mere hair's breadth away.

So, they had to be strong. They had to be brave. They had to find every bit of strength that they had and never let it go. They had to be warriors; they had to be unstoppable. They had to let nothing get in their way. They had to win in the end.

And they *did*. In the end, their love and friendship and strength always persevered. It always did, in those stories. How could it be any other way? Who would tell the story otherwise? But while these stories were filled to the brim with danger and terror and death, they were also always full of love and friendship. *Always*. And the heroes endured and persevered because they loved each other, and they held each other, and they supported and uplifted each other through thick and thin, and they forgave each other, and they grew together, and they saw the faintest glimmer of beauty and hope in the darkest of places and the darkest of times, a single star shining in the night's skies through the veil of heavy clouds, and they made each other see it if one of them had lost their sight. And so, they won in the end.

As they should.

As. They. Should.

But then? What then? Do you remember how those stories went?

As I recall them, they said: then, they lived happily ever after.

Isn't that a wonderful, fantastic ending?

I think it is. A very good ending, indeed.

And you know what?

We did.

It never occurs to you that you may be living a life just like one from a story until you try to tell it to someone later. And, wow, did they ever ask me to tell it. Over and over and over again. I'll have to admit, the first few times, my recounting was all over the place. Too many details, too many detours, no consistent thread to tie

all the events together. A mess, really. But, eventually, I got the hang of it. Trim down some things here and there, emphasise the key events that lead to others and make them flow smoothly from one to the other, guide the audience through how one thing led to another, and all of a sudden *your* story begins to resemble *a* story an awful lot.

And that was the gist of it. Of our story, I mean. We struggled, we endured, we fought, we loved, we grew, and, eventually, we won. And then, just like in those other stories, we lived happily ever after.

I can honestly say that we did. Oh, sure, we had no lack of struggles and hardships thereafter. Issues had to be sorted, problems had to be figured out, conflicts had to be resolved, kingdoms had to be run and rebuilt. There was a never-ending list of things to be said and done. There still is, to be honest. But *we lived*, and we lived *good*. We lived in peace, we lived in love and friendship, and we lived in prosperity. We had our happily ever after; I can honestly say that we did.

And if our lives had been a story, that's where it would have ended. Even if plenty of kids I told it to kept begging for more, more likely hoping to postpone their bedtime than not, to be honest, that would've been it. There wasn't much more to tell, not in that story. Other ones? Follow-ups and sequels? Maybe. Plenty of things have happened since. Oh, you wouldn't believe the things we've done and seen! But as for this one? That was it. Everything else that came after doesn't really fit into that particular story. We've gotten to the happily ever after. We *fought* for the happily ever after. That's how the story ends. That's how it should end.

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However.

Even if it can be made into a pretty good one, if I may say so myself, our lives weren't just a story. They were our lives. They don't simply end with just a single sentence after all the battles are won and all the hardships are overcome, as nice a

ring 'happily ever after' has to it. They go on, as they should. And, eventually, they come to their ends, too, as they must.

And this is where things get a little... Different. The stories will tell you how the adventures start and how the heroes get there and that they lived happily ever after. But what the stories don't really tell you about is... What I call the 'what then'. It's quite simple, really. It goes something like this:

And then? What then? What comes after the happily ever after?

Some things are just the way they are, and they're not always exactly the way the stories tell them. Even if they appear unfair and violent, cruel and merciless, ruthless and unyielding, they just are, they have always been, and they always will be, and that's all there is to it. That's just the way it is. We may as well be yelling at the skies for being blue; there's not much point to it. The skies will be blue. The grains of sand must drop into their neat little heap, the wheel must turn on its axle. Be thankful it's not grinding you into dust, too, while it's at it, a bitter shard of my heart would like to add.

So, what then? What comes after the happily ever after?

The long answer is – a lot. There was a *lot*. So, *so* much. New friends made, new loves found, children born and raised and loved, entire cities grew and prospered, entire worlds discovered and visited. Good times, happy times, bad times, sad times. There was *so* much of it all. There wouldn't be enough paper in ten thousand worlds to write all of it down. And, all in all, it was good and fortunate and blessed, and it lasted for a long, long time.

And then? Well, then, there's the short answer.

The short answer is that Catra left us first.

It didn't come as a surprise. We've left our youth behind decades ago. We all knew we wouldn't live forever. We all knew it had to happen eventually. And then, it had happened eventually.

None of that had made it any easier, to be honest.

The healers told us there was nothing they could do. They gave us a time frame. At least, we had that. We could begin to fathom the thought in that precious little time. We could say our goodbyes. We could hug and kiss and laugh and cry and rage and grieve together and hold each other in that time. We could take a lot of pictures together. We could eat all of her favourite foods together, as long as she was able to still stomach it. We could tell each other all the 'thank you's and 'I love you's we could manage.

It still burned like hot coals in my lungs when we got the call. We still cried through the night until first light broke when we got the call.

Adora was not the same since. She took it stoically, as best she could. She cried silently, at least when she wasn't alone. She assumed her stiff formal soldier posture during the funeral, even all those years unable to erase that from her muscle memory. Silent tears ran down her cheeks as she tried her darndest not to let her voice crack during the eulogy she gave. It was a beautiful eulogy. It was a beautiful goodbye.

But Adora wasn't the same since. And who in their right mind could blame her for that? Grief is a messy, hard thing; a heavy weight to bear. It changes people. We weren't the same since, either. But Adora was a little... Different. It was the little things that I'd noticed first, once the worst of it had passed. Adora said she was doing alright. Adora said she was doing okay. But she spoke a bit less. She ate a bit less. It was as if there was always a little delay before joy reached her eyes. It was as if each of her smiles had some hesitancy dulling it.

And I saw She-Ra more frequently.

At first, I thought it may have been my imagination, but others confirmed that they felt that way, too. She-Ra's presence increased its frequency. We loved She-Ra, too, of course. There was nothing wrong with that. But, at first, I'd meet She-Ra rather than Adora once a week. Then it was She-Ra several times a week. Eventually, she was She-Ra more often than not. I even heard that a mail lady, delivering a package to Adora in the early morning hours, was greeted by She-Ra at the doorstep. (The poor mail lady fainted in shock – she was born long after the Horde Wars and thought that She-Ra was just a fairy tale, that's why I heard about it.)

Sometimes, Adora doesn't even react to the name Adora any more. She'd only turn around if I called her She-Ra. She says it's because her hearing is slowly going, but I'm not entirely convinced. It's a thought I wouldn't ever dare to say out loud, but it has crossed my mind. I fear that the day Catra died, we lost Adora too. We weren't ready for that. We weren't ready for Catra, either, but you know what I mean. This was... Different.

Time heals all wounds, they say. It fades all scars, they say. But they don't say anything about them going away, do they. So what if there's nothing left but scars?

Honestly? I don't know. It's not like grief leaves you the same person it found you as, anyway. But the grains of sand keep dropping into their neat little heaps, and the wheel keeps turning on its axle, and so it goes on, and we do the best we can.

It didn't leave us unaffected, either, even after all this time. I find myself thinking quite often about how I would've wanted our grand-grand-children to meet her. Them, perhaps, although I shouldn't say that. She-Ra's still around, after all. Maybe Adora will someday return, too. Both she and Catra had come into our lives so suddenly and so forcefully. They have changed us; they have changed who we are so deeply, it never entered my mind that there may be a day when any of them wouldn't be around. Or at least a single phone call away. Even now, months later, it's difficult to even imagine life, the world, anything really, without them just being... there. They were always there, around, and they were always meant to stay forever. I would've wanted our grand-grandchildren to meet them, to know them; them who have meant so much to us, them who have been so much of *us*. But the grains of sand keep dropping into their neat little heaps, and the wheel keeps turning on its axle, and someday, even forever is over.

It's the same for us, really. It's much easier to say than to understand, I think. Truly understand, I mean. I saw it in Catra's face, back then. There was something new, something else there, something I hadn't seen before in all those years. Someday, our forever, our happily ever after, it'll be over, too. Probably not tomorrow, and maybe not next year, but after that? Who knows. All I know is that it'll have to end eventually. We all know that. It always comes sooner than you think, you'll always want more time, you'll always need more time, there'll always be more things to be

done and to be said, and, despite all that, someday it must end, and someday it will end. The grains of sand must drop into their neat little heap, the wheel must turn on its axle.

And that's okay. That's just life. That's just the skies being blue. If you're lucky, as we certainly were, you'll have your chance to say your good-byes in time. Take those pictures, hug and kiss and love them while you still can. Sing songs together, read stories together, write and paint together, eat together, laugh together, cry together, grieve together. And that's pretty much all you can do, really. I certainly wouldn't know any better. That's also why I just wanted to leave a handful of words behind before it happens.

We've had our happily ever after. We really did. Back then, we didn't think it would ever end. And that was okay, back then. But it will end at some point, one way or another. We kinda-sorta knew it back then, but we didn't really understand it. I'm not sure I fully understand it now either, but I do think I understand it better. Everything must end at some point, and that's okay, too. I know that you know that, too, at some level. At some point, we all need to let go, as much as it'll hurt.

And that's okay.

It's okay to hurt. And it's also okay for things to end, too. Even if at some point you thought it'd last forever. Even beyond the happily ever after. It's okay. It'll be okay. I promise. Even if it's not the same, it'll be okay.

I promise.

Be well, friend. And may you find your happily ever after as we did.