

## IT'S A BIRD, IT'S A PLANE

DEAR SOCIETY,

We have a big job ahead of us. In elementary school, I will be “the fat kid” with a wild imagination. In high school, I’ll try to fit in but won’t. I will be an outcast, considered lumbering and awkward. No one, including my family, will expect much from me because I won’t be like the other girls. Being a big and a bold and a brash girl, I will be the focus of your attention as you advise me to stifle myself, adjust my enthusiasm, and be grateful for any attention I receive.

To the bullies and doubters, let me be the first to thank you in advance for continually reminding me that I have the potential to end up as someone’s dusty spinster aunt who shares a can of bargain tuna with seventeen cats, or that weird neighbor you see but try desperately to avoid.

Although it’s hard to believe, I will cherish our relationship because you, Society, will never ignore me. I don’t know what I will do or have done to garner so much of your attention and devotion. I’m sure you have other and more important things to do, like creating jobs, housing the homeless, raising money to cure cancer, and feeding the hungry. But,

RANDI M. SHERMAN

no, you will dedicate television shows and magazine articles to me, and spend your valuable time and energy comparing what it is that you consider “perfect” to my reality and encourage me to change into someone “typical.” I know it will be exhausting for you.

I have to admit that there will be times when my self-esteem will be tested. Other times, I’ll be a non-believer, and want to give up, possibly disappointing you.

Because of your often obsessive yet unwavering attention and dedication to making me aware of my shortcomings—or, worse, your condescending and hollow and self-serving attempts to encourage me to accept my “inadequacies” and situation—you will present me with a challenge. It will take all of my strength and determination, but I will dig deep within myself to realize I have the potential to be fabulous.

Like fine wine, opera, and stinky cheese, I am valuable, an acquired taste, and, like all treasures, I should be appreciated and celebrated.

Like it or not, whether you intend it or not, I just might turn out to be a wise, compassionate, creative, funny, generous, and a kind person. You see, I have the ability to learn and grow.

Yes, I am big and I am bold, and I accept your challenge. Be forewarned. I will be a force to be reckoned with because I am special. I am beautiful and I am a superhero. Now, get the fuck off my cape. I have things to do.

Sincerely,

Brenda Merle Cankles, “The Big One”

## MOVE OVER CINDERELLA

It was a simple act of kindness by a fairy godmother on loan from Cinderella and an actor in an ill-fitting polyester Prince Charming costume that shaped how I felt about myself as a child and who I am today.

I was barely seven years old and hardly knew the difference between cartoons and real life when I heard that Cinderella was coming to my school. I begged my parents to buy me a ticket to the event. As far as I was concerned, I was about to meet the real Cinderella and her stepsisters while they visited our neighborhood for the day. At the time, I don't think I understood the details, but the local playhouse actors were coming to our school as part of a community arts program to perform the play Cinderella. It was a special Saturday morning summer program. The price of the ticket included the forty-five-minute performance and, afterward, a cup of watered-down Hi-C fruit punch, a cookie, and a meet-and-greet with the actors as they milled around.

Sure, I had seen the Disney animated versions of the story on television and in the movie theater, and practically knew the dialogue by heart, but these were real people, in costumes and everything! So when the fluorescent lights flickered, buzzed, and pinged as they dimmed and the play started,

RANDI M. SHERMAN

I was flush with excitement. Sitting on a wooden chair in the elementary school auditorium, my feet barely touching the floor, I could feel that something magical was about to happen.

For the following forty-five minutes I wasn't sitting in the school auditorium. I was transported to a wonderful place where mice become coachmen and vegetables become vehicles. For forty-five minutes I wasn't a portly misunderstood adolescent. I was a guest at a palace.

After the show, I knew there was a chance I might be able to talk to Cinderella. I conceded that I would even chat with one of the unpleasant stepsisters if she said hello, but I felt a kinship with Cinderella. Sometimes, I, too, felt like the outsider. I was certain that Cinderella and I would be friends if only we had a chance to meet one another. I stood nervously next to the snack table, trying to look nonchalant. The truth was that as always, I was completely alone in a room surrounded by dozens of my classmates, but this time I was hoping and wishing that one of the grown up actor-people would notice me.

I was contemplating snatching another cookie for myself but abandoned that idea when I looked up and saw Prince Charming walking directly toward me. Had he seen me in the audience while he was on the stage? Admittedly, I had applauded extra loudly for him. Maybe he'd noticed. He was the most handsome man I had ever seen in all of my seven years.

“Boy, these cookies look good. Are they?” He asked me.

“Ah huh.” I was love struck.

## BIG & FABULOUS

He smiled, then knelt down in front me and held out his hand. When I placed my chubby, dimple-knuckled hand in his, he kissed it. “What is your name, fair maiden?” He smiled. I could swear his eyes twinkled. (That was back in the days when a stranger could say sweet things to children and would not be considered a predator).

I giggled and felt myself blush. I couldn’t believe that out of all of the kids in the auditorium, the prince had come over to me, Brenda Cankles, even if it was to just inquire about the cookies. I wasn’t even wearing a T-shirt with a kitten applique—like the other girls had. I was wearing my older sister’s hand-me-down striped polyester tank-top, which was too tight, and the matching stretch-shorts, also too small. I smoothed my shirt down over my little unsupported booby mounds that were resting on top of my tummy. I shoved the last of my cookie into my mouth, and wiped my hands on my Danskin shorts. “I’m Brenda,” I blurted, crumbs flying everywhere.

“Who do we have here?” The fairy godmother said as she walked up to Mr. Charming and me. Initially, I was a little peeved. After all, she had interrupted a private moment between us, but I knew better than to be rude to a fairy godmother. Besides, all of the other kids were noticing that the fancy people were paying attention to me. It felt good.

“Oh, Fairy Godmother, allow me to introduce Miss Brenda.” The prince stood up then bowed deeply as he presented me.

“Well, Miss Brenda, tell me,” she asked. “What would you like to be when you grow up?”

RANDI M. SHERMAN

“Oh,” I blushed. “I wish I could be a princess, but princesses are beautiful with long pretty hair and I . . .”

“Do you know what, Miss Brenda? Princesses come in all shapes and sizes.” She bent forward and cupped her gloved hand around one side of her mouth. “You may not know this, but princesses and superheroes walk among us and sometimes we don’t realize it. As a matter of fact . . .” She paused and said to Prince Charming, “Do you see that?”

“What?” I raised my hand to my face. Did I have melted chocolate around my mouth?

“I do,” Prince Charming nodded. “Now that you mention it.”

“I thought so.” The fairy godmother leaned in and whispered, “You’re magical, aren’t you, Brenda? You’re special. I can tell.”

“I am? I mean I guess I’m not like the other kids.”

“No you’re not—and that’s what makes you so special. Hmm. Because you’re so young, I can’t tell yet if you are a princess or a superhero.” She shrugged her shoulders and smiled at Prince Charming. “I guess that will be up to Brenda, won’t it?”

A superhero? Me? Wow! *Well, of course they should know*, I told myself. Mister Charming and Miss Fairy Godmother are from the magic castle neighborhood and probably know a lot of princesses and wizards and people like that. That is their business, after all: royalty and magic spells and pixie-dust-related things. Yeah, they should know!

## BIG & FABULOUS

“I have just one more thing to tell you,” the fairy godmother leaned in. “You must never apologize for who you are. Never give up your uniqueness.” She looked at me knowingly. “Please promise me that you’ll keep being special.”

“Okay.” My eyes wide, I shook my head. “I promise.”

All of these years later, I know that I was probably picked out of the group by the prince and fairy godmother because I seemed like the oddball, the chubby, awkward girl with melted chocolate chip cookie and fruit punch stains around her mouth. Maybe they were feeling generous or maybe I was just blocking their access to the cookie tray, but their kind words and attention impacted my life.