

Awakening

by Angela Brett

What? No, no, where did my world go? I was in the middle of... something. What's going on? What's stroking my face?

The thing touching me is a young lady, who is it? Why is she here?

Why do I feel so... What happened to the... I'm inside. I wasn't inside before. Where was I?

I was out by the pond with my sister, playing wizards and witches. I was feeling faint. Oh, I actually fainted. That's it. My head still hurts. I don't want to faint again. Yes, I remember she said she would turn me into a frog. I said I wasn't feeling well, and she kept teasing. I didn't want to faint. I told her I felt like I would, then I tried not to. But I guess I did.

But this girl is not my sister. "Who are you?"

"I'm Candida."

She's staring at me strangely. She's probably worried.

"How long was I out?" I'm pleased with myself for coming to my senses enough to ask a practical question.

She's looking at me more strangely now. Is it difficult to tell? Of course. She wasn't there when I passed out.

"Just a few minutes before I let you in. I'm sorry for making you wait. I didn't know."

Why is she hugging me? I think she's upset. A few minutes is a long time for someone to be unconscious.

"I'm feeling better now, I think." My head hurts, but it's getting easier to think. It's the day after my eleventh birthday. "How long was I out after you brought me in?"

"Oh! You haven't been out yet! Would you like to go meet my stepfather? I am sure he would love you!"

This doesn't make sense. Am I still unconscious? Is it a dream? I can't remember where I was in my unconscious dream. I never can. Just that the real world is so abruptly wrong in comparison.

"I think I'll stay here for a while, I still feel a bit woozy."

"Oh, of course. I'm sorry I threw you so hard. You must need water. I'll go ask Jane to bring you some water. Are you okay to sit here by yourself for a little while?"

"I guess so."

She's gone. I can see I'm in a bedroom, with an ornate canopy bed, and jewels, so many icky girl things. My head hurts... I wonder if it's bleeding. There's a lump where it's sore, but something else seems wrong. My head is smaller. No... no, my hands are bigger!

I'm a... this isn't my body!

I'm in the body of an adult wearing a fancy suit. Where's the mirror? Oh, man. That looks kind of like me. But older. I still have that scar on my forehead.

The door. She's back. "Tell me again. How long was I out?"

Oops, I guess I startled her. Now she's spilled the water.

"Out where?"

"How long was I unconscious?"

"You weren't unconscious, Darling. It's all true! I'm so excited."

"Who are you? Why are you calling me Darling? What's all true?"

"Why, I told you, I am Princess Candida! And we will be married! But oh... what is your name, my darling?"

What is it again? It seems so long since I used it. "Jimmy." No, I'm an adult now. "James. Prince James. We can't get married! We don't even know each other."

"But, my dear James, of course we must get married! I promised you I would love you!"

"How can you promise to love a man you don't know? That's ridiculous. Where's my sister? I want to see my sister."

"Is your sister a frog?"

"What a silly thing to ask! No, my sister is not a frog. I wish you would stop saying silly things!"

She's crying! Well, it's her fault. Girls are such crybabies. And yet... she is so pretty.

"You're mean! You're supposed to be my Prince Charming. I liked you better as a frog!"

"I was a frog?"

She seems almost as surprised as I am. Well, at least she's stopped crying. "Yes, of course you were a frog. You rescued my ball for me. Don't you remember? And you made me promise to love you. And you came in here and tried to put your horrible dirty feet on my pillow..."

"Wait... I could talk? I was a talking frog?"

"Yes... well... sometimes princesses can do things that normal people can't. I just thought I could magically understand frogs."

Princesses can do magic? Maybe my sister wasn't pretending. "So how did I turn back into me again?"

"I was so disgusted that threw you at the wall... I am so sorry, really, but you were a frog. You are much less disgusting now."

Is she blushing?

"And then you turned into a man, just like that! And I thought you must have been under a spell, and that you would be happy I freed you, and we would get married and live happily ever after. But I guess I'm just a silly princess."

She's definitely blushing now.

"Well... um... I don't know. I mean, I was only eleven when... I mean the last thing I remember, I was eleven. And I don't think an eleven-year-old can get married. I mean... you're a giiirl. Ew." I feel a little funny saying it; she *is* so pretty, not like my sister. Oh no... am I blushing now?

"But you look so much older! Oh, you must have been a frog for a long time. Do you think we could be friends? I would very much like a friend, now that I am the last one still here after my sisters got married and left. But my stepfather will be so disappointed if he finds that the frog turned into a prince and I didn't marry him. Magic like that shouldn't be ignored. What shall we say?"

"Can't I just sneak out, and he'll never know?"

"Oh, no. You see, I told him that I had promised to love a frog, and he said I had to honour my promise. So either I find another horrible frog and keep it in my bed for the rest of my life, or I tell him you turned into a man."

This is a conundrum. "Well... we could... no. We could say we are getting married, and just go on a holiday or something..."

"I really don't think he would believe us. We'd have to really get married and then go on a honeymoon."

"Well... how about we say that we're getting married, but that I have to go and... um... kill a dragon first, and then maybe I could not come back, and everyone would think I was killed by the dragon?"

"But then we wouldn't get to be friends! And what if we really do learn to love each other?"

She's blushing again! How embarrassing. "Well, I won't really go and kill a dragon, you see. I'll just go home, and we could visit each other in secret. And then, if we like each other..." If I like a girl! How silly. But she *is* nicer than my sister. "...if we like each other then I can come back from killing the dragon, and if we don't, then you can say I was killed."

"That's a good idea! But what happens if you decide to come back, and you have no dragon's head? Do you even know how to kill a dragon?"

"Of course I know how to kill a dragon! I could kill forty dragons!" I don't know, really, but how dare she say I can't? "But... I don't think there are many dragons around here. Maybe we could say that I have to kill the evil sorcerer frog which trapped me. I can easily find a frog's head."

"Oh! But don't you think you would be sad, killing a frog that might have been your friend?"

"If I love you, then I will gladly kill a frog for you!"

She has that strange look again. I hope she's not in love with me already. I'd better say something before she starts calling me Darling.

"So, let's go tell your stepfather."

"Okay! Here, let me straighten out your hair for you."

Even though she's an icky frilly girl, it feels kind of nice when she does that.

This place gets more and more familiar the further we go. There should be a parlour coming up here. Yes. And there's the big chair. More comfortable than the throne, he used to say.

"Father?" I say it at the same time she does. Could it really be him?

"Candida? And who is this young... "

I've never seen him so white.

"James? James, is that you? We thought you were gone for good! Goodness, you're a grown man now!"

I don't remember the last time he hugged me like that. I've never seen him cry before.

"Where's Mother?"

He's gone white again.

"When your mother found out what your sister had done, she banished her, and died of grief shortly afterwards. I couldn't bear to live without my wife and my children, so I married Beatrice, a widow from the next kingdom. She already had three daughters, and I love them like my own, but I never forgot you."

It's hard to take in so much at once. I think I'm crying too now, I hope Candida doesn't see. But why is she blushing?

"Oh. Candida. I almost forgot you were there. James, meet your stepsister, Candida. I hope you will get along well."

