

There was a young prince whose father was a wise, beloved king. His kingdom was renowned for its prosperity, and he for his kindness. In his kingdom, however, lived an evil sorcerer who became jealous of the power the good king earned from the people. In time the sorcerer was able to raise a dark army and defeat the king, who had long since disbanded his standing army after years of peace. The dark sorcerer had the king, the queen, and all of the court killed. But the young child of the king, spirited away by his caretaker, escaped with his life.

Many years passed, and the kingdom fell into darkness and misery. The good prince grew up in exile, listening to the stories his caretaker often told of his father, the once-wonderful kingdom, and of love. While visiting a far away country, he met a young sorceress, with whom he began to explore and travel. Eventually the two fell in love, and were married. As the years passed, he became convinced that it was his destiny to reclaim his father's kingdom and restore peace to its citizens. With the aid of his young wife, he led a rebellion that overthrew the sorcerer's army.

Eventually the prince cornered the sorcerer in his father's old castle. Finally, after a long battle, the sorcerer lay dying at the feet of the victorious prince. With his last gasps, however, the sorcerer delivered a terrible curse: the moment that the prince's first-born son drew its first breath, the prince (by then a king) would breathe his last.

Arriving moments too late to counter the curse as it stood, the heartbroken king's wife was able to use her power to alter it slightly. When the king's first child was born it would fall into a deep sleep, but the king would live on. Once the king died, the child would wake and begin to live. Several years passed, and the king and queen did indeed have a child. On the day of the child's birth, it fell into a slumber so deep as to resemble death.

For many years the king and queen reigned over a glorious kingdom – suppressing dark rebellions, fighting terrible dragons, and arbitrating countless disputes with wisdom and patience. Time went by, and eventually the king's beloved wife fell terribly ill. Too sick for all the magicians and doctors in the kingdom to heal, she died peacefully in the night. Now old, wise, and tired, the king decided that the time had come for his reign to end and that of his sleeping son to begin.

But how, he wondered, to convey all the wisdom, learning, and experiences he had acquired to the young son with whom he would never speak? For many days the king considered what he should do. He tried to write his stories, but found that the full truth of his time could not be conveyed on paper. He tried to tell them to his courtiers that they might relay them to his son, but found that upon their retelling the love and authority of a father speaking to a son was lost.

Months passed, and the king could find no answer – until, one day, a strange man entered the village surrounding the castle. Dressed like a long-lost and homeless traveler, the guards nearly threw him out – until he told them that he had an answer for the king, a way that he would be able to share his reign with his son. The king's men brought the odd man to the

throne room, where he promised to explain his plan. Before he began to speak, the man opened one of the dirty brown sacks he carried on his stooped back and emptied it on the floor. A gasp rose from the court as countless gems of incalculable worth and incomparable beauty spilled out across the ground.

“Each of these gems,” he told the astonished courtiers, “contains a story.” The king stooped to pick up one of the shining stones. The moment that he touched it, he could see, in his mind’s eye, the remarkable story of a young warrior from a distant realm who defeated an old dragon and restored the stolen wealth of his homeland. It was as though, for just a moment, the king lived through the young warrior. Excited, he begged the mysterious traveler to record the stories and lessons of the king for his son. The man agreed, on one condition: for every story that he recorded on the king’s behalf, the king would have to give the man a story for his own collection. There was another catch: every story that the king told the man would be lost to the former forever: once told, the stories would be erased from the memory of the giver. The king, a wise man who always took time when making decisions, asked for a few days to consider the offer.

In fact, the king knew immediately that he would accept the strange merchant’s bargain, but agonized over which stories he would keep for his son and which he would sell to the man. Should he give his son the tale of his greatest conquest, or the story of his greatest diplomatic triumph? As the hour of the stranger’s return drew near, the king was struck by a sudden thought: the merchant had not qualified which *sort* of story the king must turn over as payment! Immediately he began to catalog every picnic he had taken, every feast he had thrown, every vacation he had enjoyed. He racked his brain, making notes of every ‘frivolous’ story he could think of and of every critical lesson he’d learned, matching them up and preparing to share them.

Three days after making his dramatic proposition, the memory merchant returned. The king, all smiles and confident that he had found the man’s loophole, told the epic tale of his first experiences in battle – how he had slain the enemy general by hand and had stopped his forces from retreating with a mighty speech. As he spoke, his words swirled and began to draw color from thin air. When he had finished, the glowing mist evaporated to reveal a beautiful gemstone in the merchant’s palm, which he promptly handed to the king. “Now,” said the merchant, “you must give me a story.” Smiling broadly, the king told the brief story of a mass he had attended where the father had forgotten the words to his sermon and been forced to improvise, much to the enjoyment of the parishioners. When he finished, another gemstone sat in the palm of the merchant’s hand – smaller and slightly less magnificent than the first, but still beautiful. The king expected the merchant to be furious at receiving so simple a yarn in exchange for the magnificent story gem the king kept for himself, but when he looked to the man’s face the king saw only a quiet smile. The man carefully placed the gem into a new bag and bid the king continue.

For days the king and the merchant worked, the former sharing and the latter listening. Slowly the king began to notice that the places in his mind where he would once have found colorful memories and misty recollections were growing blank and grey. “What use have I of memories,” he reasoned – for he knew that he was not long of his world. Finally, the king

decided that he had told every story of value – the conquests, the lessons, the trials, the decisions, the diplomacy. These he kept for himself – for his son. He had told also all of the silly stories – the romantic evenings, the long walks, the sunsets he'd seen, the histories he'd heard as a child. The merchant left, and the king had the gems the lonely stranger left behind made into a wonderful crown, which he bade his vizier give the child once it awoke and grew ready for the kingship.

Several months later, tired but satisfied, the king died. He was buried next to the wife of his youth, and they walked together again in a land altogether wonderful - but far from the world of this story. The kingdom mourned the passing of its beloved ruler for many weeks, and many nations with whom he had dealt mourned with it – for all the surrounding lands had enjoyed decades of peace as a result of the wise statesmanship the good king had practiced.

As soon as the king's eyes closed in death, the child's awoke in life. Years had passed, and the child had grown in his sleep. He was crowned king, and the moment that the crown touched his head his mind was flooded with the memories, the lessons, of his father before him. He took these precious gifts from his father to heart. His reign began well – there was an undeniable echo of his father's wisdom in the new king's actions. He made the correct decisions, seemed to understand the economy and the culture of his nation, and followed many of the same processes as his father. As time went on, however, it became clear that the young king was not the same sort of ruler as his father.

Where once the feast halls of the elder king had been thrown open to the people and visiting dignitaries, the young king closed his doors that the nation's coffers might be spared unnecessary expense. In the time of his father young married couples would seek the king's blessing and counsel, but the young ruler ended this practice for which he could find no purpose. Ambassadors, once warm towards the kingdom because of the humor and good conversation that his father had always been able to provide, began to harden their policies – the young king did not inspire the friendship his father had once engendered.

As time went by, the kingdom began to suffer. Though no one could exactly put a finger on the difference, something in the king's demeanor and character was undermining the peace and prosperity of his people. Neighboring nations, once friends, began to eye the rich land and strong resources of the kingdom. There was no love, no laughter, no warmth in the troubled young king. He knew that he was responsible for the deterioration of his beloved kingdom, but, try as he may, he could not seem to right the wrongs he wrought without comprehension. He began to despair for his people.

There lived in this time, just outside the castle walls, a plain young woman of exceptional intelligence. Local women would come to her for advice with children, men would come to her for advice with women, and children would come to her for new games to play and new ideas to explore. As she grew, she began to understand the nature of the sickness from which the kingdom suffered. The story of the mysterious merchant and his gemstones was well known throughout the land, and she slowly realized that the wise old king had made a critical mistake.

Though he had been diligent in passing on his wisdom to the young king, he had failed to pass down his love. Though he had made sure to record and deliver to the young ruler tales of his exploits and lessons, he had sold away his jokes, his songs, and many other of the things which made him not only a wise king but a good one. The young woman began to search her mind for a solution, a way to bring back the love and kindness the kingdom had once known.

Just as she began to despair of finding any such answer, the mysterious merchant – unseen in all the kingdom since his last visit – appeared at her door late in a fall evening. She begged him to return the gems – the stories – of the old king. He still had them, he told her, but he could hardly trade something so valuable for nothing. He was no philanthropist: what had she to offer? “I can give you stories of my own, good traveler.” Willing to agree but sensing she was desperate, the merchant agreed – but with a slight modification to the old king’s bargain. She would have to deliver *two* stories for every tale of the king’s the merchant returned. Disappointed but determined, the young maiden asked the merchant for some time in which to think of stories. He agreed, and she began to note every memory she could find.

After three days, the merchant returned, and she began to share her experiences. The times she had done laundry for her neighbors, the story of the soup she once made for a cousin of the king, and many others. Her stories produced small, beautiful gems, which the merchant was always willing to accept. After each two that she produced, he would hand her a gem pulled at random from the old king’s bag – the very same bag into which he had placed them decades before. The bag was still mostly full, however, when she began to realize, with horror, that she had few stories left to tell. Although she had lived a full life, she had also lived only briefly compared to the old king. How would she secure the remainder of the elder king’s stories? Already her mind, once filled with the many happy adventures and memories of youth, was growing grey and cold. All she had left was the essence of her personality and her mission – should she lose those, all would have been for naught since she would forget the young king and the plight of his kingdom. Tired and afraid, she asked the ragged traveler for some time in which to think. He agreed to grant her one day to gather her thoughts – those few that were left.

Try as she might, the young woman could think of no more memories to share. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she turned her thoughts to every corner of her mind, finding nothing where once color and life had lived. Late in the night, however, as her eyes grew heavy with sleep, an incredible thought struck her, a wonderfully new plan – she knew that she had no choice but to attempt it when the merchant returned. Several hours later, at dawn, they sat down and resumed the previous day’s activity.

This time, however, when the time came for her to give up a story, she closed her eyes and began to tell a tale not from memory but from a new place in her mind, a place neither she nor anyone in her young world had ever visited before. From depths hitherto unexplored she told of a gallant knight, guilty of a checkered past but determined to regain his honor, who rode throughout the land seeking every word of wisdom he could find until he became one of the greatest men the world had ever known, realizing in the process that the pursuit of good and striving to be greater in the present would always erase evil done in the past.

At last she finished and worked up the courage to open her eyes – and when she did, she looked upon a magnificent red diamond, more beautiful than any she had seen before. The old merchant smiled, and she continued. Excited and jubilant, she told story after story until the bag in the old man's hands was empty and a pile of glistening old gems lay at her feet. The merchant left, and she hurried to the castle, where she explained what she had done. Willing to try anything for the sake of his kingdom, the young king took the forgotten gems of his father into his arms – and felt love, happiness, kindness, age, and youth spring into his heart and mind all at once. He smiled a true, genuine smile, the first of his life, and embraced the weeping young woman.

The maiden had given all of herself for her kingdom, and the renewed king, upon hearing the stories she now told whenever she could, asked her to remain in his court and tell stories for as long as she wished. This she did, and remained in the castle for many years – the first storyteller of a young world.