

The Princess and the puffer jacket

Sally Cairns, with illustration by Véronique Heysbroek



Once upon a time, a princess was born in a beautiful kingdom. She lived in a magnificent palace, set in idyllic grounds. Bees and butterflies danced above gardens full of flowers, silver streams flowed softly through wooded glades, and the birds sang amongst the trees. The princess's father, the King, wanted his people to be happy, and held many extravagant parties for everyone to enjoy.



The princess was as beautiful as her kingdom. She had a smile for everyone, and a gentle, joyful laugh that could gladden the saddest and loneliest of hearts. She loved her people and she was beloved by them. A chance to meet her was valued more than one of the King's party invites!

On her fifth birthday, the king took the princess to visit the Chief Witch of the Citadel. The Witch lived on the top floor of the tallest tower in the kingdom; a sleek, dark building, which spiked high into the sky, casting a long shadow across the land.

As the lift took them up and up to the Witch's room, the princess held her father's hand tightly. Inside, the Princess thought the Witch looked forbiddingly tall and thin and stern. She had steel grey hair and steel grey eyes, and sat very upright behind a huge desk, framed by awards on the wall, although the little girl didn't know what they were. The Princess and her father were offered the fanciest biscuits she had ever seen.

The Witch smiled at them but her eyes were cold, and the Princess shivered.

"I was told we needed to see you," said the King.

"Yes," said the Witch, and she waved her hand. A thin grey vest appeared hanging in the air, the colour of smoke, and shimmering slightly.

It disappeared, and to her surprise, the Princess felt something clinging to her skin. She looked down and realised she was now wearing the vest. She tried to lift it, but it seemed to be stuck fast.

"You must always keep it on", said the Witch. "And now put this on, too," and she handed the Princess a yellow puffer coat to put on. It was much more substantial than the vest but much looser.

"You must wear the coat all the time as well," she said.

"But what if I want to take it off?" asked the Princess.

The Witch leaned forward in her chair, no longer smiling, "Then DOOM will come to the kingdom. You must do as I say. Come back the same time next year. Now leave me."

The King and the Princess left and did as the Witch had told them. At times, it was a bit cold, and the Princess was glad of the clothes. At other times it was a bit hot, but she got used to wearing them.

On her sixth birthday, they went to see the Witch again. The biscuits were even more impressive, but the Witch's eyes seemed colder than before. Again, she waved her hand, and another thin grey vest appeared. Again the Princess discovered that she was wearing it – this time over the top of the previous vest. The two vests stuck fast to each other, and to her skin, and she could not lift them. The little girl was scared, but she did not dare disobey the witch.



"Take off the coat," said the Witch – and the Princess did – amazed for a moment to feel cooler – then the Witch handed her another, slightly thicker one. "Put this on instead" she said.

As she did so, the Princess immediately felt hotter and slightly stifled. Again the witch bade them return on her next birthday and again the King and the Princess left, relieved to get out of the tower and into the fresh air.

The next year it was the same – and the next – and so it continued – until soon enough, it was the Princess's fifteen birthday. By now, she was wearing 10 vests and a much thicker coat. When the weather was hot, she felt dizzy and faint, and the people were worried by her wan smile and fatigue.

"Does she really have to wear all this?" asked the King, "Aren't there other options?"

The Princess looked beseechingly at the Witch with her big, trusting eyes, but the Witch looked coldly back.

"All the Witches of the Citadel agree that this is the only choice," said the Witch. "Otherwise, great harm will come to the people of this kingdom."

The King did not want great harm to come to the people of his kingdom. But he also loved his daughter. And so he decided to consult the wisest wizard in the land. The elderly wizard lived in an ivory tower and found it a bit awkward to climb down, but he did his best to help the King.

"In brief," the wizard said, "the princess will be unwell unless she removes the clothes."

"But the Witch said that great harm would come", said the King, "and the Princess doesn't even know how to remove the vests."

"Hmm", said the wizard, "I do not know how to remove the vests either. And I do not know what will happen to the kingdom if she removes the clothes. But I do know that she will be unwell unless she does."

The King did not find this advice useful.

"You could go and see the Witches of Innov and ask for their help," suggested the wizard.

The King had never been to visit the Witches of Innov before, but he was grateful for a positive suggestion, so off he went. When he arrived, he was very surprised to find that they lived in a different sort of place to the Witches of the Citadel. Spread out in front of him was a higgledy-piggledy mass of small domes, with lots of younger witches rushing around.



Clouds of sparks and coloured smoke rose from their latest inventions, and there seemed to be one area where they were busy making things disappear. He stopped the witch nearest to him and asked where the person in charge was.

"Oh, no-one's in charge," she replied cheerfully, "we are all in charge of our own things."

"But how can I ask for your collective help?" asked the King.

Eventually, it was agreed that they would go into one of the larger domes, and all of the witches crowded in so that the King could speak to them. There were no biscuits, and the chairs were somewhat scruffy. But they seemed keen to help so the King explained the problem.

"I have an anti-doom spell," said one of the witches, "but I will need gold for my ingredients."

This was exactly what the King had wanted to hear, and he turned to the speaker hopefully, but then another witch spoke:

"I also have an anti-doom spell – and I also need gold," she said.

Then another witch said the same thing – and another – and another. It began to get overwhelming. The King listened for a bit, then thanked the witches and left, without making any promises.

On the way home, he reflected that they had always given the Witches of the Citadel some gold – but then, the Kingdom was prospering, so maybe it was worth it. He did not know whether to give any gold to the Witches of Innov, and he had no idea how much might be needed to ensure that the anti-doom spells really worked. He got the impression that they didn't know either.

The next day, the Chief Witch of the Citadel called him to see her. He could tell she was angry as soon as he entered her room.

"I hear you went to see the Witches of Innov yesterday," she said, staring at him with her steely eyes.

"You know they are mostly frauds who cannot do proper magic. Did you not see how disorganised and unprofessional they are? You must not listen to them. You must trust the Witches of the Citadel. It is best for the kingdom that the Princess wears the clothes."

She leaned forward, and the tone of her voice became more menacing, "I cannot answer for what will happen if she removes the clothes."



The King came home confused and worried. But as it happened, it was the beginning of winter and the weather got very cold. As a result, the Princess got better – and she was able to play as she had before.

The King decided he was worrying too much and that nothing needed to change. And so things went on as before. And every year, the Chief Witch of the Citadel added another vest, and changed the coat for a thicker one.

By the Princess's twentieth birthday, she was unwell for most of the time. The 15 vests she was wearing, combined with the thick puffer coat, meant she could do very little.

Sometimes, the vests itched. Sometimes, she had to lie down or she would pass out.

The coat felt suffocating. She could not visit her people very often and they were sad not to see her. The King was deeply worried, so this time, he called together the three wisest wizards in the land, hoping at least one of them would have a good idea.

But they seemed to have very little new advice to offer. They were clear that the Princess needed to remove the clothes, they didn't know how to remove the vests and they recommended visiting the Witches of Innov again. One – a seer with some powers of foresight – said he thought doom wasn't inevitable. And another suggested that maybe the Princess could at least remove the coat.

When the King visited the Witches of Innov for the second time, he was surprised to find considerable change. The domelike buildings seemed much better organised, with some bigger ones, and the witches had elected a council to represent them, who met with the King in a new meeting room.

"Our anti-doom spells are much better now," they said.

"How much better?" asked the King, "Can you be sure that no harm will befall the people of the Kingdom if the Princess at least takes off the coat?"

"We think that much will change, but all will be well," said the witches.

"But are you sure?" asked the King.

"It is hard to be sure of anything," they replied.

This was not the reassurance that the King had been hoping for.

The next day, the Chief Witch of the Citadel called him again. He expected her to be angry, but to his surprise, he was greeted with a strange smile.

"Come in," she said, and offered him another amazing plate of biscuits.



"I have found a solution for you. My colleague has a new creation called the 'air conditioner'. We can install it in your palace and be 100% sure that the temperature will be colder. That way, the Princess will be OK, and I am certain that doom will not occur."

The King liked the certainty he was being offered, and he could see how cooling the palace would help the princess, so he agreed. In the end, it took more gold than he was expecting. And some of the beautiful gardens had to be dug up and filled with ugly machinery. But the temperature in the palace did reduce, and, for a while, the Princess seemed better, although she was not able to leave the palace and visit the people.

But still, every year, the Witch added another vest, and replaced the coat with a thicker version.

By her twenty-fifth birthday, even with the air conditioning, the Princess was constantly ill. Sometimes her skin felt so hot, it was as if it was on fire. On other days, rivers of sweat poured down her, making the vests and the coat more uncomfortable than ever. She lay in bed constantly, longing for something – anything – that could help. Outside, the people held vigils, praying for her to get better.

By this point, the King was desperate, and so he called together all the wizards in the land for advice. For many days, they discussed the issue, and then gave their thoughts.

"The princess must remove the coat," they said.

"You must give the Witches of Innov some gold to work on spells to remove the vests and to help avoid doom. If you don't do this now, the Princess will die. If you do this, we think that some bad things may happen, but we think the people of the Kingdom do not want the Princess to die, and they will make the best of things. This is our advice."

The King knew that he must do as they said. Slowly he went upstairs, dreading what might happen, but also dreading what would happen if he did not act. He told the Princess to take off the coat.

The effect was immediate – the Princess sat up, feeling like she could breathe more easily than she had been able to for several years. She was still too warm due to the many vests, but taking off the thick stuffy coat made a huge difference. Now – getting up and moving around was possible, and her skin no longer felt as if it was on fire.

She went out onto the balcony to wave and smile at the people, who gave a mighty cheer on seeing that she was a bit better.

The King went back to his throne room and sat down to wait for news from his Kingdom. All day, he waited, nervously tapping his fingers, scared by what he might hear. Finally, a messenger rushed into the room:



"Urgent news, Sire," he said, "Something extraordinary has happened. The top floor has fallen from the Citadel building and the Chief Witch of the Citadel has vanished."

"So the Citadel is no more?" asked the King.

The messenger looked puzzled. "No Sire, the Citadel still exists, but it is smaller, and they are electing a new Chief Witch. Also, they say they want to work with the Witches of Innov to find a way of enabling the princess to remove the vests."

"What about the people of the Kingdom?" asked the King.

"When the top floor of the Citadel fell, it crushed many workplaces. No-one was hurt, but now many people have no way to earn money for their families."

So the King went to see the Witches of Innov for a third time. Their council chamber was even smarter now, with its own awards, and he even got offered some biscuits.

"What can you do?" he asked, "Can you help?"

"We will need lots of gold," they said, "and also land".

The King thought, "Can you use my palace and its grounds?"

"Yes", they said.

"And can you do a spell to remove the vests?" said the King.

"Not yet," they said, "we are working on it".

And so the King and the Princess moved into a small house, and the palace and its grounds became a new workplace for many people. The people missed the extravagant parties but were glad they had somewhere nice to work. The King gave most of his gold to the Witches of Innov instead of the Witches of the Citadel and things did change. Some things were better and some were worse, but there was not doom. The people were deeply glad that the Princess was alive and they loved to see her smiles and hear her laughter. And everyone tried to find a spell to remove the vests, so that she could live happily ever after.

Not really the end

Intended metaphors:

- Princess: earth
- Vests: CO2 emissions
- Puffer jacket: short-lived climate forcers, such as plane contrails



- King: decision-makers, including local, national and international government
- Chief Witch of the Citadel: those elements of established industry who argue that anything other than a continuation of 'business as usual' will be catastrophic for the economy and politically unpalatable, and who often speak as if they represent all industry.
- Wizards: scientific community
- Witches of Innov: those involved in proposing solutions to the climate crisis which may include both new technologies and new ways of living (including reducing demand for some existing activities)
- Air conditioner: example of some technological solutions that may provide a short-term or partial fix but which will be insufficient without more drastic action
- Biscuits (since someone asked!): the power of profitable industries to gain credibility through high-profile initiatives (glossy 'roadmaps to net-zero', corporate targets etc) and by offering something back (corporate social responsibility initiatives, work with universities, political support etc.).

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