

More Weight
by Susie Sillett

Cast list:

The performer – Ideally this should be played by a young woman, but the performer may be of any age or gender, as long as they play the part as themselves.

The doors to the space open and the audience enter the fairy-tale world. The stage should be the calculated mess of a living room turned upside down. They are given time to look around the land and sit on the seating provided, which is scattered in a circle around the central space. The performer enters.

The performer ignores the audience and takes up a small doll in the centre of the space. She strokes the doll's hair tenderly and then places her in the wooded area of the world (which is represented by a washing basket full of green and brown strips of cloth). The doll is the only human image used in the piece – the other props should be household objects. There should be some sense that Meredith begins the play as a child but, through the magic of the fairy-tale, she ages until she is roughly the same age as the princess, who is in her late-teens. The story is acted out in the style of children playing pretend games with their toys. I have given specific staging instructions as an initial guide, but the rest is open to interpretation and personal preferences. The use of objects should feel largely spontaneous.

The lights should gently rise and fade to match the time of day described by the performer.

Performer: Once upon a time, there was a little girl called Meredith.

The performer manipulates the doll to explore the space

Meredith loved the woods because they were the one place where she could get away from her impatient mother, whose yells were absorbed by the branches of the trees, which

translated her words into whispers. They were very poor, but in this place Meredith could change her ragged dress into wild weaves of embroidered greenery and knitted tree bark.

The doll dives among the cloth and emerges with bits of green and brown falling off her

Her father had disappeared into these woods when she was very young and she imagined that he had transformed into one of the many trees of the forest.

The doll runs back and forth

If she could just find the right one among the thousands then she could show her father just how much fun it would be to come back and live with her, and how much better it was to be a person than a tree. Then maybe her mother wouldn't get so cross with her and there wouldn't be half as many chores. Deep down though, she knew that it probably was nicer to be a tree.

One day, she came home to find people hurrying in and out of one another's homes as though they were all out of sugar. 'What's happening?' she asked the torrent.

The performer picks up arbitrary objects to represent each villager.

'It's the princess', called out one. 'She's sick', said another. 'Get on home, Meredith, your mother wants you', said the third. As Meredith trudged back to her house, she thought about the princess. She'd seen a portrait of her once and had thought she looked friendly enough. Someone else had looked at the same picture and exclaimed, 'Look at those thighs! They'll be tree trunks before you know it', and she figured that maybe everyone was worried that the princess was going to become part of the forest as well.

The house is a shoe box with the lid removed. Her mother is a pine cone.

For once, her mother didn't say a word about the drying mud in her hair and twigs in her button holes. She simply placed a bowl of unidentified soup in front of Meredith and sat facing the fire until she had finished; a curious look in her eye flickering in time with the flames. Upon hearing the spoon clatter into the empty bowl, she turned to her daughter and said, 'You've wasted enough of our lives in those woods. It's time you became useful. They've just dismissed the princess's maids and are looking for someone new. If we can

clean you well enough before tomorrow then maybe we can fool them into thinking you've got some gentility'. Meredith knew there was no point in arguing with her once she'd made her mind up and instead spent the evening trying to sprout roots in the hope that she'd be a sapling by morning.

Unfortunately, she was entirely human when her mother tipped her into the cold bath the next day.

The doll is put into an empty, label-less can and shaken.

The water washed over her rather than into her and, after much scrubbing, she was rosy red from head to toe and her cleanliness seemed catching. Only her green and brown speckled eyes hinted at the distant thicket.

They walked along the main road towards the palace gates; her mother taking forceful strides, while she galloped wildly beside her (determined to make the most of her last walk of freedom). Before long, they reached the end of the queue; about half a mile from the palace.

The palace is a clothes horse with a variety of colourful tops strewn over it. The queue is a line of low-value coins, which the performer spills in front of the clothes horse.

Girls of all shapes and sizes were lined up with their porridge-faced parents who were ready to sell. It felt like market day as the young livestock were rubbed down and brushed up, while they waited for the doors to open. Meredith felt particularly sorry for the child in front of her, who couldn't have been more than four or five, being grilled by her parents on the best way to plump up pillows and chastised for forgetting to trim her three most prominent nose hairs. What was worse was that the poor girl was going along with it; rattling off the instructions she'd memorised and tearfully tearing the offending follicles with her fingernails.

At eleven o'clock, the line began to move (the coins are shoved under the clothes horse) and the multitudes were ushered on to the estate. The applicants were inspected one by one as they passed under the gaze of the head servant (represented by an old dishcloth) and were silently issued with a green or red slip of paper (the performer tears up scrap paper and

scrawls on the pieces with green and red crayon). Green told them they were still in the running, but red delivered efficient disappointment to the hopeful rejects that were, nonetheless, permitted to tour the grounds as a consolation prize for turning up. As Meredith neared the moment of judgement, her heart began to flutter. She couldn't say why, but she was suddenly overcome with nerves. Her body moulded itself around this feeling; her back straightened, her face softened, and her hands somehow felt more dextrous and willing. The competitor in front walked forward into the glare. A quick whip of decision and she was through the gate with a splash of green clutched between her tiny fingers.

It was Meredith's turn. Her mother gripped her hand and pulled her forward. She slowly lifted her head to look at the slightly shrivelled woman, whose whole body seemed to have spent too long doing washing up. She felt a moment of understanding pass between them and stretched out her hand. She took the paper and looked down, only to find a thin piece of red. She had failed. 'I don't know what I was thinking', said her mother, 'As if one scrub could undo years of dirt. She must have seen it under your skin. Ah well, never mind. Let's head home'. Meredith couldn't quite believe what had happened, but she knew that she couldn't just leave now. 'Please, I'd like to look around first'. Ordinarily, her mother would have snorted and dragged her away regardless, but something about the tremor in her daughter's voice made her hesitate. 'Alright, but don't be too long. It may not be a palace, but there's still plenty to be done at home'.

The pine cone goes back in the shoe box.

Meredith turned to look at her surroundings. She could smell the luxury and broke into an exhilarated run to explore what she would never have. She raced past heaps of young women who were either sitting quietly, or weeping into the grass (they felt they might as well do some watering while they were there). Up and over molehills worth more than her house, she stumbled up to the edge of the castle. She let her hand run along the hard stone as she dashed around its high walls.

Suddenly her fingers caught in a small crevice (An empty toilet roll). She paused and felt around the crack. The brick dust crumbled away and she discovered a sort of handle. With trembling excitement, she pushed and pulled until the handle gave way to a hole, about the

size of a small oven. Without hesitating, she squeezed her way through and wriggled into the darkness.

The doll is pushed through the toilet roll and into a sock on the clothes horse. The sock is turned over and over.

She toppled into a windowless room full of tickling smells and little light. Feeling her way around in the gloom, Meredith bumped into more things than she could count and sneezed even more times than that. Eventually, she found the door. The lock had rotted through and with a bit of a shove, it opened up to a long corridor (The doll is pulled out of the sock again). She turned to close the door again, only to discover that it was in fact disguised as a portrait featuring a statuesque lady with no clothes on. Meredith blushed at her silent nakedness and decided to look round as much of the castle as she could before she was caught.

The doll climbs up and down the rungs of the clothes horse.

At first she didn't find much, just a lot of empty rooms drenched in gold. Finally, she heard voices and managed to clamber on to a balcony overlooking the great hall. Below, she saw a clump of prospective maids, scrubbing at pieces of silver, using their own sweat for lubrication. She felt a wave of relief that she had not made it past the first round and silently thanked the head servant whom she had previously cursed.

At that moment, she heard footsteps echoing outside along the corridor towards her. Her heart sank – her adventure was going to be over sooner than she had hoped. But then, out of the corner of her eye she spotted a door leading off the balcony to her right. Without thinking, she dived towards the knob, twisted, pulled, and sat, breathless behind it (The doll leaps from the clothes horse and into an empty, open suitcase). She waited for several minutes, ear pressed close to the oak, before she sighed with relief and turned to look at the room.

It was much bigger than she'd expected; the space around her was almost suffocating. There was so much air weighing down on her that she struggled to stand. She faced a bed the size of a small swimming pool, dripping with duvet and a whirlpool of pillows. In the middle she spotted a lump of woman. She halted, waited, and then realised that it wasn't going to move. She crept closer and examined the still body, which faced away from her. For

a moment, she thought it might be dead, but she could see it was breathing. It didn't seem to pose much of a threat and Meredith's curiosity got the better of her.

The princess is a tiny baby shoe, long outgrown.

'Hello', she said. There was no reply at first; the lump simply began to slowly rotate to look at her.

'Oh, hello', the woman said. Meredith suddenly recognised her. She looked less friendly now than in her picture, but Meredith supposed that was only natural given the circumstances.

She didn't look particularly ill though. 'Sorry, but why are you in here?' the princess asked.

Meredith: I, I was sent here.

Princess: Whatever for?

Meredith: They've hired me, to talk to you, to be your maid.

Princess: Really? I thought that was supposed to take all day.

Meredith: Doesn't take all day to spot talent. They took one look at me and sent everyone else home.

The princess looked her up and down.

Princess: Right. So you're here to talk to me?

Meredith: Yeah.

Princess: Go on then.

Meredith: I don't have anything to say.

Princess: Oh great. Well, I hope you're not expecting me to make conversation. Maybe you should go and come back later.

Meredith: I can't.

Princess: Why not?

Meredith: They told me I wasn't to leave this room. I'll lose my job.

Princess: Oh.

Meredith: What do you normally talk about?

Princess: A lot of things. Nothing at all.

Meredith: Luckily, I'm an expert on both.

Princess: Sometimes I do forget.

Meredith: What do you mean?

Princess: Forget what people talk about. Never mind. Maybe it would be better if we just sat

in silence.

Just then there was a sharp knock on the door. Before the princess knew what had happened, Meredith had leapt under the covers. 'Come in', she called. A sheepish guard (a chewed pencil) poked his head around the door. 'Sorry, Your Highness, but someone's reported seeing a little girl running around the castle. A rogue applicant. You haven't seen her have you?' The princess stared at his disembodied face, a moment of confusion registering, followed by the word, 'No'

'Right, thank you. Sorry to have disturbed'. As soon as he disappeared, the princess ripped off the covers and said, 'I think you should go'.

Without another word, Meredith collected herself and left. She managed to sneak back out the way she came in without leaving a trace of her illicit visit. She ran home (back to the shoe box) to find a fuming mother along with a similarly fuming dinner. 'It burnt, but that's all you're getting', she said. As Meredith ate her charred meal, she thought about everything she had seen. 'You know, she's not even sick', she said. Her mother looked up,

'What do you mean?'

'She's just lying in bed. She doesn't even look ill'

'Do you mean she's faking it?' Meredith shrugged and wiped her plate clean. Her mother looked thoughtful for a moment and then grabbed her coat. 'I'm just going next door. Don't do anything', she said, before rushing out of the house. Meredith decided to go to the woods.

In the darkness, the trees always felt closer, as though checking to make sure the others were still there; reaching out their branches in the thick gloom. Meredith climbed into the arms of one and fell asleep to the wind's whistling lullaby. She woke to what sounded like a thousand people having the same conversation. As she neared her home again, she picked out odd phrases such as, 'What a waste of taxpayers' money', 'I can't just call a sickie whenever I want, why should she?', and 'Oh yes, we'd all like to spend a few days in bed, but what would happen then, eh?' Meredith finally found her mother, who told her there was a protest planned for the following morning against the princess – demanding that she get out of bed and fulfil her royal duties. Meredith felt a little sorry for the princess, but she hadn't been that nice to her and she couldn't help feeling that her fellow subjects were right.

The following morning, she found her mother painting a large placard that said, 'We don't need another Sleeping Beauty!'

'Now we'll show them!' Her mother said. Meredith couldn't help thinking that her mother was still sore about her rejection the day before and when they set out on the march, she recognised a lot of faces from the previous queue to the castle (another line of coins), some of them still clutching their red slips. The swelling anger was palpable as they headed towards the palace gates; their voices rising into an unintelligible roar. This was a chance for the people to express all their ills through the princess's lack of illness and they were going to make the most of it. Some of them began working on the gate to break it down; others simply clambered up the walls. It wasn't long before a swarm of guards arrived to break up the crowd (various items of stationery). To their surprise, the king (a toothbrush) and queen (a toilet brush) also emerged and addressed the angry mass through speaker-phones. 'My people,' said the queen, 'please listen to me'. Her voice cracked as she spoke, but she was determined to be heard. The mob paused in surprise at being spoken to by a face they'd previously only seen on stamps. 'Let go of your anger, it is misplaced. My daughter. My daughter is very sick. No, it is not a sickness that appears through blood, boils or fevers. My daughter is. My daughter is depressed'. At that last word, any reverence the people might have had vanished and they broke into terrible laughter. 'Depressed?' said one, 'She ought to take a walk in my shoes – that'll show her what real misery is!'

Fuelled by this news, they finally broke through the gates and flooded the grounds. In terror, the king and queen were hurried away to safety as the people tore apart everything they had paid for. The land they collectively owned (the performer throws the various objects around the clothes horse into the air). Meredith briefly saw her mother among them, looking like a wild animal flecked with foam. In the face of such fire, the guards abandoned their positions and joined the rabble. It was a fantastic, ugly release.

Meredith, afraid of the violence, ran as fast as she could in the opposite direction. As she rushed to the safety of the woods, she crashed into a peculiar looking vehicle. It was a carriage trying to look as little like a carriage as it could. A sharp face appeared from underneath the contraption, saw that she had discovered them, and then disappeared. Almost as quickly, a hand emerged from another corner and pulled her inside. It took her a few moments to recover from the shock and the sudden darkness, but then she was able to

make out a few dim faces. 'Keep quiet', said one. Then another whispered, 'I know her!' 'What?'

'She was in my room, yesterday!'

Meredith realised she'd been dragged in with the royal party and felt both terrified and exhilarated. 'What was she doing in your room?'

'I don't know. She didn't do anything'

'What were you doing in her room?' Meredith didn't know how to answer such a terrified and terrifying voice and so instead she said, 'I know where you can hide'.

A few minutes later and the carriage was hurrying towards the deepest corner of the forest. The unusual company sat in silence as they rippled over knobby roots and crashed through stray branches. (The performer pulls an empty ice cream tub from the bottom of the washing basket) Eventually they stopped outside a unique gathering of trees, which only Meredith knew about. Not content with the traditional layout of the woods, these oaks had intertwined themselves with one another in a tight embrace. Beneath the moss, there was a small opening and it was through here that Meredith guided her ornate guests (the objects should be squeezed in awkwardly). They clambered in to find a snug space, with walls of soft green and brown. There were a few stumps to sit on and, in the glimmering light, Meredith thought it was ten times nicer than any room in the palace.

The king and queen sat very stiffly and promptly announced that they would be returning home the following morning, but that the princess would be staying indefinitely. The princess looked unmoved by this decision and simply ran her fingers up and down the lines in a piece of bark she had picked up. Meredith, still unsure of how all these things had come to pass, occupied herself by collecting nuts and berries for a feast that was, if not fit for a king, was all he was going to get.

They slept awkwardly and when day broke, the king and queen were all too happy to leave their daughter behind. They weren't sure what they would find on their return, but they were confident that, once the populace had had a chance to get their anger out, they would be happy to pick up the pieces and return to their everyday routine. 'It's happened before', said the queen, surprisingly cheerily. The issue of the princess would have to be dealt with

'delicately' but they would come for her when the time was right. In the meantime, Meredith had, rather ironically, become the princess's only maid.

She spent most of the morning explaining and apologising to her mother for her absence. 'Anything could have happened to you', said her mother, 'And I'm almost sorry it didn't. It would have served you right'. Meredith knew better than to say anything about her mother's own behaviour. She managed to sneak a couple of pieces of bread away for the princess, only to discover that the king and queen had already sent over tray upon tray of rich food and fine delicacies. The princess sat staring at it all as if willing it to do something impossible. 'Don't you want any?' asked Meredith. 'Maybe later.' Meredith was confused that the princess would turn down such wonderful food and felt frustrated because her answer meant that she couldn't have any either. As the day went on, she fluctuated between doing her chores to appease her mother and visiting the princess, who never seemed to do anything but sit in different parts of the room. Finally, Meredith got up the courage to speak to her properly.

Meredith: Can I ask you something?

Princess: Sure.

Meredith: It'll be rude. I don't want you to be cross because we're the only ones here and I wouldn't know what to do.

Princess: Just ask.

Meredith: What is wrong with you?

(Pause)

Princess: I don't really know. I'm depressed apparently.

Meredith: What happened?

Princess: What do you mean?

Meredith: To make you depressed.

Princess: Nothing. It happened.

Meredith: Oh.

(Pause)

Meredith: Can't you just, cheer up? I mean, find something you like doing and do that? For a bit.

Princess: I don't really want to do anything.

Meredith: But you've got everything. You're the princess. I thought princesses were supposed to be really happy.

Princess: How many have you met?

(Pause)

Meredith: Do you want to do something now? In the woods I mean. In these woods, no one can be sad, it's impossible.

Princess: No, I just want to stay where I am.

Meredith: Well, well that's stupid.

(Long pause)

Meredith: Don't you think you should try and do something about it? You're causing a lot of problems for people. If I was depressed, I'd just get up, shake it off, try a new day, sort my head out. You're just not trying.

(Pause)

Meredith: This is just selfish now. You have the world at your feet and what are you doing? Just moping around, sad because your life is perfect and nothing bad has ever happened to you. Can't you at least pretend? That's what kings and queens and all that are for.

The princess said nothing. Infuriated, Meredith stormed home.

Once again, the people were buzzing with news from the restored royal family. The king and queen had issued a proclamation stating that anyone who could cure the princess of her 'affliction' would be given her hand in marriage. Meredith privately wondered why anyone would want to marry such a miserable creature, but she was struck with the realisation that the princess probably wouldn't want to marry them either. Fortunately, she figured that since the princess was most likely faking it, she could effectively choose her own husband by perking up at the right moment.

Contenders for the princess gathered outside the palace; echoing the queue of maids from only a few days before. Another collection of bodies. The princess was temporarily brought back from the woods to be prodded and poked by all manner of suitors (a variety of absurd and peculiar objects). Some muttered incantations under their breath, others fed her foul-tasting potions, and still more simply told her that it was all in her head and suggested she be cut open and put back together again in a healthier, happier configuration. One gentleman insisted that he be allowed to escort the princess to his favourite club for the

evening. The king and queen, exhausted after a long day of failure, were relieved to push the princess out of sight and mind.

The performer turns on a CD player and begins flashing table lamp light switches on and off to create the club scene.

The pounding music and the grinding bodies would 'awaken her spirit', he claimed. Really all he wanted was a bit of a grope in the dark.

Meredith, who had snuck along with them, managed to push him towards someone who looked like the princess(a high heeled shoe), but was altogether more up for it and pulled the princess to another corner. Her face looked both full and empty, her eyes both wild and numb. Meredith took her arm; it was cold and covered with sweat and tequila.

Meredith: WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

Princess: I don't know

Meredith: WHAT DID YOU SAY?

Princess: I SAID I DON'T KNOW. I DON'T KNOW WHY ANYONE'S HERE.

She looked around at the blur either side of her.

Princess: SOMEONE CAME UP TO ME EARLIER AND SAID, 'IF I WAS HERE AND I WAS SOBER, I'D WANT TO DIE'. HE SAID, 'I'M ONLY A LITTLE DRUNK AND I WANT TO KILL MYSELF'. I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHO HE WAS. I DON'T EVEN KNOW IF HE WAS HERE. IT'S AN OVERLOAD. THE MUSIC.THE MOVEMENT. IT'S SO MUCH THAT EVERYTHING ELSE IS SHUTTING DOWN JUST TO KEEP UP.

She staredatthe dance floor in confusion. Meredith looked at the wilderness of bodies and thought they might be in hell. 'LET'S GO', she shouted. The princess nodded and they squirmed their way out into the cool air. They breathed in the open relief and decided to walk through the empty streets for a bit. The princess had never been around the city like this before. It felt like another world in the fresh darkness.

One table lamp is left on. Meredith and the princess stand underneath it.

'I'm sorry', said Meredith.

Princess: For what?

Meredith: For what I said to you. About not trying.

Princess: It's ok. It's what everyone says.

Meredith wanted to ask more questions. To ask everything. Eventually she found the courage to say, 'What's it like? Having it, having the thing that you have? What does it feel like?' The princess paused for a long time and said,

Princess: (Haltingly at first, then gathers momentum) Heavy.

Really heavy.

The scary thing is that it feels like it might be ever so slightly too heavy.

Like it's pressing all the air out of my body. Slowly. And I'm just lying there waiting and wondering when it's going to crush me completely, knowing that I can't lift it off. I'm helplessly waiting and wondering. I see everyone else and they're holding it high above their heads, some are clutching a piece of string attached to it, floating up in the air. Weightless. And they're looking at me, and they're saying, 'Just pick it up, use your arms, use your legs, don't just lie there' and I'm thinking, 'They're right, that's what I should do. I should just pick it up, roll over, put it somewhere else', but thinking about doing it doesn't change the fact that I can't. That it's ever so slightly too heavy. And even the thought of not picking it up makes it, makes it a little heavier. And the terror of never, of never being able to lift it up makes me panic, makes me feel trapped, makes the air come out a little faster from my lungs, and now there's even less to hold it up.

But the worst thing. The worst thing about this weight. Is that I remember not having it. I remember walking around totally unburdened. I remember that being good, but I don't know how to get back to that. And there's a part of me, a part of me that doesn't care, that says, 'More weight', that wants it to be over, for there to be nothing left but the weight of it.

She stopped abruptly and they walked in silence for a moment. 'Oh', said Meredith. 'I've never had anything like that'. She didn't know what else to say.

Turns off table lamp.

They walked home, occasionally pointing at things of interest and saying, 'Oh look' while the other nodded, but otherwise keeping to their own thoughts. Before Meredith left the princess for the night, she hesitated and said, 'I'm not especially strong, but I can try to help you pick it up'.

The following morning, she went back to check on the princess. She looked as though she'd only just fallen asleep and Meredith could still see faint tracks down her cheeks. Then she noticed something was clutched in her hand. She peered closer, but then hastily retreated. The princess was holding a dagger(a rough pebble). A very crude dagger, admittedly; it appeared to have been carved out of a piece of tree bark. She didn't know what to do. Instinctively, she reached down and tried to ease the knife out of her hands. Of course, this woke up the princess, who leapt to her feet in a panic. The dagger still between them, they stared at each other.

Princess: What are you doing here?

Meredith: I just came to see how you were.

Princess: Well, now you've seen. Great show isn't it?

Meredith: I don't understand. Why do you have a knife? Who are you afraid of? No one can find you here. You're safe.

(Pause)

Princess: It's not other people I'm afraid of.

Meredith realised what the princess meant and was stunned.

Meredith: Why would you want to do that? You don't need to do anything like that. Do you think that will get rid of it? Cut you loose? I don't think it works like that.

Princess: How would you know how it works? You're a child. You don't understand anything. I don't even know if I was going to do anything. Don't assume I was going to do anything. And don't you dare tell my mother about this.

Meredith: I won't. Of course I won't.

(Pause)

Princess: (Quietly)It's not that I want to die. It's just that I don't want to carry on living.

(Long pause)

Meredith: There once was a blind tailor.

Princess: What?

Meredith: There once was a blind tailor who, who loved making dresses. Long dresses.

Princess: I don't know what that has to do with anything.

Meredith: In fact, his dresses were so long that no one in the village could wear one without stilts. But the dresses he made were of such a high quality that no woman of society wanted to be without one.

Princess: Why are you telling me this?

Meredith: I'm distracting you. Do you want to know what happens next?

Princess: (Pause) Sure.

Meredith: Well, this meant that, at all the major events, the women were a good couple of feet taller than all the men. This was something that the men certainly weren't happy with and so they set about making stilts of their own. Soon, the whole village were towering higher and higher as the dresses grew longer and the men shot up to match. One day (pause) one day (pause again) actually I don't know where it goes from here.

Princess: Oh.

Meredith: It was supposed to have a really clever twist but I couldn't think of one.

Princess: That's good to know.

Meredith: I was hoping to leave you on a cliff-hanger until tomorrow so you'd want to know more and wouldn't...do...anything to yourself.

Princess: Now I'm not sure I ever want to hear another story again. You've ruined stories for me forever, she said.

But she was grinning. She couldn't help feeling both a little amused and touched by Meredith's bizarre efforts to help her. Her smile wavered when she remembered all of the other things. All of the other pressures, expectations, and the absence, the fatalistic emptiness of everything that was to come. Her hands started to shake and she lay back down on the bed; her heart racing and her mind filling with a solid blackness. All Meredith saw was the princess being stubborn. She was going to so much trouble, but it felt like the princess was determined not to be helped. What could she do with someone like that?

She resolved to track down the cause of the disease and hoped that this might lead her to the cure. First, she went to speak with the parents. The king sat quietly on his throne, while the queen paced back and forth; agitatedly describing everything that had happened to the princess from the moment she was born. 'We did everything we could – the nanny followed

all the best baby books. I don't understand it. I mean, perhaps we shouldn't have put so much pressure on her, but when's the right time to tell a child they're going to have to run a whole kingdom when they grow up?'

Most of the citizens she spoke with agreed that the princess had been spoiled and that she didn't know what real work was. 'Give her a couple of days in the fields, that'll put her right' said one rather hefty woman (an oven glove), 'Don't have time to get in a tizzy when you're sweating out your body weight just to put bread on the table'. Her daughter (a mitten) darted nervous glances at her mother and Meredith, and Meredith was surprised after she'd gone a few yards from their cottage to find the daughter had run to catch up with her. 'Yes?' said Meredith. The girl didn't say anything for a few moments and then blurted, 'I think I've got it'. Meredith didn't know what to say. She'd just about adjusted herself to the princess, but to hear it from 'one of her own' was a real shock. 'I don't think you know what it is'

'Maybe, I don't know. All I know is I don't see the point in any of it. I do the same thing every day and I see the same people and I don't want to. I just want to retreat in a little hole and wait there. Wait for it to be over'

(Pause)

'I think you should go home', Meredith said. The girl froze for a second, nodded, and then ran back without another word. Feeling shaken, Meredith returned home and decided, as a last resort, to speak to her mother. 'I don't want to get muddled up in any of that business, Meredith, you should know that. It's all nonsense. People should just get on with what they have to do and stop complaining. Who of us is really happy? I don't think anyone in the whole bleeding world has ever really known what happiness is, least of all anyone here. Just let it alone'

'I can't leave it. The princess is my friend and what if there is a cure. What if there is a way to make it all better, shouldn't we at least try to find it'.

'You won't find anything is what I'm saying'

'How do you know that?'

'Oh just keep your rotten little nose out, you stupid brat!' snapped her mother. Meredith prepared herself for a hearty sulk, but then she thought she caught a glimpse of her mother crying. The tears were only there for half a second before they dropped into the pot of

soupoon the stove, which her mother stirred with increasing vigour. 'It'll save on seasoning', Meredith thought to herself. She'd never seen her mother cry, or at least she couldn't remember it.

Before she went to sleep that night, she thought that perhaps she might get more answers if she wasn't quite so direct. The next morning she rose early and made as many flyers as she could, which she then posted far and wide (sprinkle pieces of torn up tissues). Her encounter with the labourer's daughter had made her curious and so the flyers asked for anonymous responses to be posted into a wooden box in the middle of the city.

The performer collects up the pieces of tissue and puts them in a pile in the middle of the space.

When she went to check on it that evening, she audibly gasped. It was so full; people had stapled responses to the outside. She took it home, opened it up, and began to read (performer drops individual tissue pieces on to Meredith). She read about people who hadn't had a good night's sleep in years, who felt isolated, suffocated, desperate to reach out and desperate to hide away. She read about people who felt lost, who felt afraid, who felt nothing, who hurt themselves just to feel something. She read about all the hopes they had, the hopes they'd lost and the remaining hope for hope. She was surprised by the similarities, the differences, the contradictions and the consistencies. She didn't know what to say. There didn't seem to be a single cause and there definitely wasn't a single cure. Some of the letters wrote about things they'd found out about in private that had helped them – some took pills, but others used therapy, exercise, a change in their routine, their thought patterns, their diet, the way they viewed themselves and other people.

She had her dinner and gabbled to her mother about everything she'd found out, overflowing with possibilities. 'I still don't understand any of it, but I'm starting to see that I don't and that's got to be good hasn't it? There are so many options, so many ways to go, I don't know where to start with the princess, but I think we should just try everything and see what happens'. Her mother looked at her, a quiet, sad look in her eyes. 'I think you're old enough now to know the truth about your father'. Meredith dropped her fork. Her mother took her gently by the hand and led her out of the door, into the woods. It was the

first time her mother had ever gone there with her and Meredith was surprised by how easily she navigated her path through it.

They stopped beside a particularly impressive oak tree(performer pulls a mug rack out of the washing basket). Her mother shook as she reached towards it and felt along the trunk, up and over its branches. Meredith suddenly realised that this must be the one. This must be her father. She was surprised she'd never realised it before. It was obvious. The strong, wide trunk; the warm, embracing branches. She opened her mouth to greet him, but her mother spoke first. 'This is where he did it', she said.

(Pause)

Meredith was confused.

'Did what?'

'The rope was tied around here. It was very tight. Took a long time to get it free. He knew what he was doing, even if the rest of us didn't'. A terrible coldness flooded up Meredith's body through her feet. She turned to her mother, saw the tears glisten on her face, the softest she'd ever seen it. She put her arms around her waist and sobbed. The three of them stood there together. A family again for a little while.

She and her mother returned to the cottage, her mother lit a fire and they talked about her father. They pieced together their separate stories, the differences in their memories, the love and pain they had felt, and Meredith recognised the burden her mother had been carrying all these years. 'I'm so sorry', she said. 'I'm sorry for the daughter I've been, the daughter who didn't help or understand. I'm sorry and I, and I love you'. Her mother smiled and cried and told her to go and see the princess. They would have time to talk again later.

It was hard for Meredith to step back into the woods, but she plunged in and ran to the princess's makeshift home for the last time(the performer throws all of the pieces of cloth from the washing basket into the air, while Meredith runs, until all that's left is the ice cream tub). The princess looked up to see a red-faced, tear-smearing bundle pushing its way through into the room. 'Hello princess', she said.

'Hello, Meredith', the princess replied. Meredith walked towards her and the force of her wild presence made the princess stand up to meet her(the performer holds both of them, slightly above the top of the tub). Meredith hesitated, suddenly unsure of where to begin.

Meredith: How – how are you?

Princess: Fine. Thanks, how are you?

Meredith: Fine.

(Pause)

Princess: Well, I mean. Obviously not quite fine.

Meredith: No, me neither.

Princess: Not really fine at all.

Meredith: No.

(Pause)

Meredith: A lot has happened, but I just came here to say...some...things.

(Pause)

Meredith took a deep breath.

Meredith: I, all I wanted to say was that I, I don't know anything. I don't know anything at all. I have some things. I've found out some things that might help you. I don't know. But I thought, if you wanted to, we could try some of the things, and if they don't work we'll find new things and it won't matter. Even if it takes ages. I, I just wanted to say that it doesn't matter to me, what you have, well, I mean it does, obviously, it's a thing that matters, but what I mean to say is that you are valued regardless. You are loved. I love you and I really just wanted you to know that I'm here. We're here. We'll be here. If you want us. Or not.

(Pause)

The princess smiled a little and said, 'Thanks'. And the two of them, neither of them 'cured' neither of them knowing the 'cure' sat together in the woods.

Lights fall.