

Hi Pat!

I want to tell you a story. A true story of course.

The story begins a long time ago, on one of my journeys. It is about a wonder, and a myth that I found out is no myth. But more about that later in the story. A story often begins with: 'Once upon a time' and so does this. But even that a little later, so just have a little patience.

This day that we call today I sit in my hotel room and think about what happened to me yesterday night. I can't really believe it is true, but I am here in China, in Beijing.

Yesterday night I travelled from Sichuan in Chendu by train. It was all dark and cold. The train was a train that you can see in the movies, and yes the wooden benches were really hard to sit on, and I couldn't fall asleep of course, although I needed it. When I was sitting there looking out the window the train slowly slowed down, and finally stopped. I tried to look out in the dark, but there was no light to be seen... Oh, there was a light flicker far away. And then I saw that it came closer bit by bit.

Pat. Have you ever seen a Chinese dragon? I have, I hope you believe me even though I didn't at first. They are big. Big red, green and yellow heads with small eyes and a long body with many legs. He shook his head and looked at me, I tell you, I scare not easy, but this time I wondered what should happen. He opened his big mouth and talked.

"Why don't you sleep like the rest? You who have seen me, have to follow me. He said.

And I walked out from the train, I don't know why. I couldn't stop myself. It was like I thought for myself: I am in it for the adventure, and this is truly an adventure.

I sat up on his back, and off we went. Yes Pat, they fly, as in all stories, they really do. After a while, finally after flying over forests and valleys we flew over a mountain and down in the valley behind it. There I saw a fire going. The only light I had seen in ages I thought. But really it was not that long ago (I think).

Anyway, we landed and I was happy for that. I tell you, it is hard to get a grip on a Chinese dragon so it was kind of difficult not to fall off. And Pat, there were quite a few dragons there. About ten or fifteen of them. One was a little bit smaller than the rest, I immediately found out that he or she, I couldn't see if they had sexes, was the leader, because "my" dragon greeted the other one so humbly.

This yellowhead saw me. Saw me dear old small one. He said "What!? How could you let yourself you to be seen? And then it looked at me and whispered. I have heard of them, but I didn't think they existed, didn't think the stories were true said the chieftain of the dragons. And looked at me a little too close for my taste. So close that I saw his blue tongue tremble in his big mouth.

- Lets eat it, suddenly one of the other dragons said.

But I couldn't see who it was.

- Yes, said another.
- Oh, great small one I said. Thinking, now I am wasted. I am gone, dead...
- You wouldn't want to eat me, I do not taste so good.
- Why so, you? Said the small dragon.
- I am so full of bad tasting stories.

He looked at me, and then at the other dragons with his small red eyes. Shook his head, like all Chinese dragons do.

- You are a storyteller, you say you!?
- Oh, yes, I am. I replied. With a steady voice. Where I got that voice in that moment I do not know I tell you. (maybe from Bob Pegg...) But anyway.
- So, tell us a story, and we see if we eat you or not.

What was I supposed to do? I told them a story.

And now Pat, thank you for your patience, here it comes.

I began the story:

Once upon a time:

When I walked through Europe, I came upon a small road I saw on the map that it led around a forest. I planned to find a hostel in the little town on the other side of this forest. But as time went quickly and dark was near, I thought that I could as well go through the forest instead of around it. I am raised in Sweden and Sweden is all forest you know, so I could know my way I thought.

When I walked there it grew darker and darker, and I was lost. Lost in a big unknown forest. Great!

And Pat, I will let you in on a secret. The hooves and horn of a unicorn are of gold. But when they die, it turns in to ordinary horn and hooves. No idea to hunt them for the gold.

You maybe wonder how I know this?

Because when I was sitting there, in this big dark forest I heard something... like hooves. Oh, by all good gods. It was a big unicorn it was. With a big golden horn in his forehead. It was all dark of course, but the horn and hooves shining like the sun made it a little lighter in the glen.

Mount up he said to me. And I thought, this is an adventure, and I like adventures. So I sat up on the back of a unicorn.

And off we went. Through the forest, over logs and stones. And finally we came to another glen, there where a ring of maybe 15 unicorns. And there was a big one in the middle of the ring.

- Found him you did, yessss. He said.
- Yesss, it was easy, "my" unicorn replied.

I jumped off and onto the ground.

- Can you please show me the way out of this forest? I said. I would like to get to the village, not so far away from here.
- You would would you, the big one said. Yessss. To show them where to find us and kill us, yesss?

Now Pat, it was unpleasant, I tell you.

- Oh, no. I am a storyteller, not a killer, not a hunter!
- Storyteller you say?
- Yes, I am!
- So tell us a story and we might let you go, he said.

So I began to tell them a story.

Once upon a time:

There where three princes, they all thought that they where old enough to get married. So they went to their father, the king.

- Please father, they said. Let us ride out in the world to find us each a good fiancée.

The father thought it was a good idea, so he replied:

- Yes, my sons, do so.

And the first one mounted his brown steed, and rode away. In a little while he came to a crossing. There a little rat was running back and forth over the road.

- Please, leave the way free, the prince said. Or I might ride you over. And kill you.
- Oh, no. Don't do that, the rat said. Take me as your wife instead.
- A Rat! As my wife. Nooo the prince replied.

And rode off on the road to the right.

There he came to a neighbourcountry. Met the princess, found her lovely. Asked her to marry him and she said yes. She gave him a golden ring. And the oldest prince went back home. Showed his ring to the king and the court, and every one thought it was a nice ring. And congratulated him for his bride.

Off went the next oldest prince. He mounted his black steed, and rode away. In a little while he came to a crossing. There was a little rat running back and forth over the road.

- Please, leave the way free, the prince said. Or I might ride you over. And kill you.
- Oh, no. Don't do that, the rat said. Take me as your wife instead.
- A Rat! As my wife. Nooo the prince replied.

Laughed and rode off on the road to the left.

There he came to a neighbourcountry. Met the princess, found her lovely. Asked her to marry him and she said yes. She gave him a golden ring. And the next oldest prince went back home. Showed his ring to the king and everyone in the court, and everyone thought it was a nice ring. And congratulated him for his bride.

Now it was the youngest prince's turn. He mounted his grey steed, and rode away. In a little while he came to this crossing. There was a little rat running back and forth over the road.

- Please, leave the way free, the prince said. Or I might ride you over. Little rat. And then I might kill you.
- Oh, no. Don't do that, the rat said. Take me as your wife instead.
- A Rat! As my wife. Hm, why not the prince replied.
- Oh, good. Follow me, the rat said.

Off she ran, into the forest, over logs and stones, deeper and deeper into the dark forest. And finally she stopped in front of a big rock.

- Please wait here, she said.

She went into a crack in the rock, but returned quite quickly. With a beautiful ring, it had a big stone, diamond shaped as a heart.

He rode home again. When he came home he showed his ring to the king, his father, and all the court, and every one thought it was the most beautiful of all the rings. Said that he was lucky, and congratulated him for his bride.

A while passed. And one day the king called upon his sons and said.

- Now my sons, I want each of your brides to bake me a bread.

Off went the oldest prince. He mounted his brown steed, and rode away.

He rode the way to the right. Came to the country where his princess lived, went to the castle and asked her to bake him a bread. She did so, and the prince went back to his father.

All the court tasted the bread and said it was so good.

Then off went the next oldest prince. He mounted his black steed, and rode away.

He rode the way to the left. Came to the country where his princess lived, went to the castle and asked her to bake him a bread. She did so, and the prince went back to his father.

All the court tasted the bread and said it was so good.

Then it was the youngest prince turn.

- Oh, no. He thought. A rat can't bake bread.

But what should he do? Off he went. He mounted his grey steed, and rode away slowly.

He rode the way to the crossing. Went in to the forest, rode over logs and stones, deeper and deeper in to the dark forest. And finally he stopped in front of the big rock.

The little rat came out of the crack in the rock and the prince said:

- My father, eh, the king I mean. Wants you to bake him a bread.
- Ok, said the rat. Come back to morrow and fetch it.

He came back the next day, there outside the rock was a beautiful basket, with red and yellow silk ribbon woven in to it, he took the basket and the prince went back to his father.

All the court tasted the bread and said it was the best bread they had tasted ever.

Some time went by, and one day the king called upon his sons and said.

- Now my sons, I want each of your brides to brew me a jar of the finest ale.

Off went the oldest prince. He mounted his brown steed, and rode away.

He rode the way to the right. Came to the country where his princess lived, went to the castle and asked her to brew him the best ale. She did so, and the prince went back to his father.

All the court tasted the ale and said it was so good.

Then off went the next oldest prince. He mounted his black steed, and rode away.

He rode the way to the left. Came to the country where his princess lived, went to the castle and asked her to brew him the best ale. She did so, and the prince went back to his father.

All the court tasted the ale and said it was so good.

Then it was the youngest prince turn.

- Oh, no. He thought. Alright, a rat can bake bread but a rat can surely not brew ale.

But what should he do, what could he do? Of he went. He mounted his grey steed, and rode away very slowly.

He rode the way to the crossing. Went in to the forest, rode over logs and stones, deeper and deeper in to the dark forest. And finally he stopped in front of the big rock.

The little rat came out of the crack in the rock and the prince said:

- My father, eh, the king I mean. Wants you to brew him a jar of ale.
- Ok, said the rat. Come back to morrow and it is ready.

He came back the next day, there outside the rock was a beautiful bottle made out of precious stones, and gold, with blue and green silk ribbon woven into it, he took the jar and the prince went back to his father.

All the court tasted the brew and said it was the best ale they had tasted ever.

A month went by, and one day the king called upon his sons and said.

- Now my sons, I want to meet your beautiful brides.

Ohhh, no no noo! The youngest prince thought.

- I can't show them my rat!

But off went the oldest prince. He mounted his brown steed, and rode away.

He rode the way to the right. Came to the country where his princess lived, went to the castle and asked her to come and visit him and his father in a week's time, and the prince went back to his father.

And off went the next oldest prince. He mounted his black steed, and rode away.

He rode the way to the left. Came to the country where his princess lived, went to the castle and asked her to come and visit him and his father in a week's time, and the prince went back to his father.

Off went the youngest prince. He mounted his grey steed, and rode away very very slow this time.

He rode the way to the crossing. Went into the forest, rode over logs and stones, deeper and deeper in to the dark forest. And finally he stopped in front of the big rock.

The little rat came out of the crack in the rock and the prince said:

- My father, eh, the king I mean. Wants you to to come and visit him in a weeks time.
- Ok, said the rat. But then you have to get me, a shell from an egg. Two spiders and six beatles.

He got her the shell from an egg. Two spiders and six beatles.

The little rat sat down in the eggshell, put the two spiders in the back of the shell and the six beatles in the front. And then she said to the young prince:

- Now, you see to it that your brothers brides come first and I last. And you do exactly with me as they do with their brides. Off you go now.

And the prince went home to wait for his bride, the rat.

The bride of the oldest prince came first, and she was lovely. The prince took her in his arms and kissed her.

The bride of the next oldest prince came second, and she was as lovely as the first one. The next oldest prince took her in his arms and kissed her.

Ohh, nooo, what have I done thought the youngest prince. I have a rat as my bride!

And then the rat came in to the courtyard, in her eggshell with the two spiders in the back and six beatles in the front.

The youngest prince bent down picked the rat up.

- I can't kiss a rat, he thought. But what should he do, she looked so happy? So he... no he couldn't... he had to try... ok, he kissed her.

And then she turned in to the most wonderful, the finest little princess ever. All the court found her the loveliest of the princesses. The king nearly fell out of the throne when he saw her. The eggshell turned in to a chariot, and the spiders into two servants, and of course you have already guessed, the six beatles turned into six grey beautiful horses.

By the time I came so far in my story Pat, most of the unicorns had fallen asleep. But the big one with the shiny golden horn in his forehead looked at me and said.

- You are truly a storyteller. Go on.

The prince and the young princess went out in the forest. To go to her home. And the prince thought: Oh, this is crazy, shall we live in a rock in the forest. Why?

But when they came close to where the rock had been, he saw a beautiful castle. Her castle had been turned into a rock when she had been turned into a rat. And when she was set free, so was the castle and all her people.

Now the unicorn stood up and said:

- I shall take you through the forest my good storyteller. And can you please tell your kind about us? Tell them not to kill my kind, we should live in friendship.

As soon as I said that Pat, the dragons shook their heads as they do sometimes. And the small great one said:

- Did he really. Hmm. Yes I think so, you. You are here, so it must be true. True. You who got the yellowhead here, take him back.
- Yes small great one, the dragon said.

I sat up on his back, and off we went, high, high over the mountains, it was all dark, not even a star in the sky. But as we came closer to Beijing, I saw a light flicker. It was a little girl and an old man standing there, outside a little house. The girl had a candle in her hand, and her grandfather said:

- See, I told you, if you believe there is dragons in the world you need never, never be afraid of the dark.

And as soon as he said that, I saw a star be born, the light started to come back.

Here I am, sitting in a hotel room in Beijing. Telling you this story, a true story, remember I tell only true stories.

Jerker Fahlström