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He was a poor man and as such had never learned to read and write. However, he knew shapes, and to a certain extent the shapes knew him. He was a woodcarver in his late twenties and had grown up in the little house by the stream in the middle of the woods, next to the castle, as had his father and his father's father, stretching back far into the past to a time when the days were simply measured by life and death.

Unbeknownst to the man, the young Princess who lived in the castle knew of him. She had fallen deeply in love with him, almost completely by accident when, as a young woman she watched him carving the wood panels which led to the grand drawing room. Asking her father the King permission to marry the man was of course refused and she was left in no doubt that she was never to talk to him less a terrible tragedy fell upon the kingdom. Being just young enough to still believe the tales in her story books the Princess hastened to silence and hoped that perhaps there was another way.

It was very much to the wood-carver's surprise, that one day he got word from the castle that his skills were again needed. Forty-seven blocks of wood were to be carved, one each day and on the 48th he was to report to the castle for his payment. Each day the design needed would arrive on a piece of paper and he would copy it precisely onto a block of wood, each the same size and weight. It would be collected when the next design was brought. He gathered his tools and began his work almost immediately.

The first shape was simple, and it did not take him long to construct its three simple lines one horizontal attached to a vertical line in the centre leading down to another horizontal line identical to the first. On the second day the shape was more complex and after receiving the design he spent many hours attempting to perfect an upward curve, which to him seemed like a rainbow had worked itself loose. He needed two of these lines to attach to three vertical lines. It was tricky work but by nightfall he had sent the shape to the castle, curious as to why they just did not want a simple rainbow.

The third day was simple, a pure snake design, one he had done many times before, this time however he was to stop short of adding facial features or the dreaded flicking tongue, which had tempted Eve out of Eden. To him the snake was unfinished and childlike. The fourth day was wonderful; a pure enclosed ring, only a morning's work, leaving him time in the afternoon to hunt and prepare more large blocks of wood for the following days. The shape for the fifth day was repeated on the sixth, something which annoyed the man for it would have

been better to make two on one day, yet as it was a simple inverted fishing hook design he kept quiet. The seventh day was simply an extension onto this and now the fishing hook was the correct way up, and facing to the left, attached to a rather, in his mind at least, crude looking boat. Wishing he could just do his own boat left the man disgruntled and all he could do on the eighth day was strike down with force into his block of wood the three lines as he had done on the first day. These people have no love for shapes he thought—an opinion which grew as the days went on and the shapes he had to carve simply became like the others but turned around with extra bits added. Half a ring, a ring with a small fishing hook, half the shape he had so painstakingly worked on, on the second day, a fishing hook attached not to a boat but rather a straight line which he was sure represented nothing he had seen in nature. To him this became the biggest problem.

I carve into wood, thought the man, yet I am not giving this wood any natural shape, all I am doing is lines and hooks. None of this makes any sense to me. The King and Princess must not understand what beauty is, sending me only these half designs, these snakes without facial features, and crude boats which children might draw in the sand. These shapes have no meaning. Day after day I am denied from making my own interpretations. The only test of my skill is to follow a senseless instruction. Each day his anger grew at the lack of respect for his artistry and so by the 48th day when he was to report to the castle for payment, he was fuming.

He was led into a grand room, at the end of which stood the Princess. On the floor in front of her he saw a grid into which his carvings had been slotted, in the same order as he had made them, but with gaps every so often. Looking at them he saw nothing but an assortment of his worst work:

IM SORRY I CANT TELL YOU HOW I FEEL BUT I LOVE YOU
FORGIVE ME

The Princess stared at him with hope in her eyes as he stared down at the floor. And when he looked up to speak, her heart pounded inside her chest for now, after all this time, she would know his feelings. But when he spoke, his words hit her hard. 'This is not a beautiful thing' he said. 'This is an ugly thing. This takes everything away from what I thought was mine, and I accept no payment for this thing, which you have shoved onto the floor to be trodden on, and deformed'. And he left.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Paul Byrne.