

Pumpnickel

by Supercake Studio (<http://www.patreon.com/supercakestudio>)

In a small town on the edge of the kingdom, there lived a humble miller and his daughter, Molly. Years of millwork had given Molly strong arms and a strapping frame, perhaps a bit *too* strapping to be fashionable—but hard work meant more than beauty at the edges of the kingdom, and anyway, she was still rather pretty, with her sea-blue eyes and chocolate-brown curls. Molly was known through the town and countryside for her strength and skill, but she was known even more for her legendary appetite. After a day of toil, she was known to demolish meals that would have left any *two* other girls groaning.

One day, the village was visited by a representative of the king, a whip-thin official who looked down his long nose at the peasants and their backwards ways. “It’s not as though I *want* to be here,” he sniffed, “but I’m afraid with feasting season in the offing we mustn’t overlook any source of food. You have no idea how much flour the castle goes through during a single night.”

“It must be a lot,” the miller said, “if you’re willing to come all this way.”

“A lot! It’s simply horrendous. The court itself is most refined of course, most refined, but the guests—the *guests!* There was a merchant at the last feast—an absolute pig of a man, he was—and his *wife!* Even worse! On my seal of office, she must have been the most gluttonous woman in the world!”

The miller laughed. “I’ll bet my daughter could out-eat her.”

“Very unlikely. If you’d seen this woman—”

“*You* haven’t seen my daughter when she’s hungry. The girl could polish off a wedding banquet all on her own!”

“Really?” asked the representative. “Remarkable indeed. May I borrow the young woman for a few days? The king will want to hear of a such a...robust specimen.”

And so Molly was taken to court, though she didn’t quite understand why. The simply-dressed girl blushed as the fancy lords and ladies of the court looked her up and down, murmuring behind their fans.

“She certainly looks hearty enough,” the king said. “Rather ox-like, in fact. But if she can truly do as her father claims, she will make a good, strong mother of princes. Very well. Test her. If she succeeds, she shall be an excellent match for my eldest son.”

And with that, Molly was escorted to one of the royal dining halls and locked inside. “What are you doing?” she cried, pressing her face to the door’s tiny window and pulling helplessly on the great iron handle.

“We shall see if your father speaks the truth,” the king’s representative informed her coldly. “You have until sunrise to eat the table bare. Succeed, and you will be rewarded. Fail—as I rather expect you will—and—”

Grinning darkly, he drew one bony finger across his throat.

Molly’s turned, panic rising in her breast. The massive oak table was laden with enough food for a dozen people, more than even she could eat on the hungriest day of her life. Nevertheless, she sat and ate as if her life depended on it, in the chilling knowledge that it did indeed.

By the time the eastern sky began to turn pink, Molly was so full she could scarcely breathe, and still almost a third of the food remained. A single fat tear rolled down Molly’s cheek. She knew she was going to die, but she simply couldn’t eat another bite.

“Oh, if only someone would help me!” she wept.

“All you have do was ask,” purred a soft voice. Molly looked up to see a strange little woman perched on the table in front of her. She was only three feet tall, and dressed in a simple tunic and breeches, but her hair fell to her knees in an avalanche of coal-black curls and her pale green eyes were ancient and clever. The last thing Molly noticed about her was the pointed ears sprouting from the sides

of her head—and the nubile horns almost buried in her hair.

“You’re a pretty little thing,” she said, wiping away her tears. “Are you a nymph? Some kind of sprite?”

“*Something* like that,” said the little woman agreeably. She rubbed her hands together eagerly. “So, it seems you need some eating done, and I can do it. But what will you give me if I do?”

“I haven’t much—I can offer you my ring—but surely such a little thing as you couldn’t—”

“Accepted!” said the little woman, and striding down the table, she began to devour the remaining food at an incredible rate. When the table was entirely clear, she sighed and patted her stomach with one hand. With the other, she snatched up the ring. “The work is done! Now Molly—awake!”

She snapped her fingers, and Molly jerked awake with a start to the sound of keys rattling in the door. To her wonderment, she saw that the table before her was bare. Had she only dreamed of the little woman’s help? She certainly felt full enough. And yet her finger was as bare as the table...

“Wonderful!” the king exclaimed when he saw the empty table. “You shall wed my son!”

“Caution, your majesty,” said the adviser, wagging a finger. “This was merely the least of your feast-halls. How would she fare against a more substantial meal? We must be sure, after all.”

And so that night Molly found herself being locked into a much larger hall, and facing five great tables, each as laden with food as the one from the night before. Once again, she ate until her stomach could hold not a crumb more, and then she sank to her knees and wept.

“It appears you need my help again,” said the little woman, her delicate hand falling on Molly’s shoulder. She lifted the trapped girl’s face to hers and wiped away a tear. “I can finish off these scraps for you. But what will you give me if I do?”

“My necklace?” Molly said. “It’s the only jewelry I have left, and it’s not worth much, but—”

“Done!” said the little woman, rubbing her hands together with glee, and she began to eat, even faster than before. Before an hour had passed, all five tables had been eaten bare. The little woman sighed and belched.

“Goodness!” Molly said. “And I thought it was impressive that you could even eat half as much as I could, let alone—all this!”

“Oh, this is nothing,” the little woman chuckled. “I’ll be taking that necklace now, thank you, and now, Molly—awake!” And she snapped her fingers.

Molly awoke with a start just as the door opened. The king and his adviser goggled at the empty tables.

“The girl has the stomach of a whale!” the king exclaimed in delight. “The way she eats, my grandsons will be giants! Big, fat giants! Begin plans for the wedding!” He was already picturing the army of enormous warriors that would conquer his rivals.

“Pish! See how she grunts and groans, your majesty?” the adviser said, irritated. “I’m sure she doesn’t *usually* eat like this at all. Test her against a truly large meal, and she’ll give up for certain.”

That night, instead of a feast hall, Molly was locked in the castle pantry.

“If you’re *really* the most gluttonous woman in the world, this should be no trouble for you!” the king’s adviser said, and slammed the small iron grate shut in Molly’s face.

“I never said I *was*,” she sniffled, looking woefully at the towering stacks of food. It wasn’t even prepared! There were bins of raw vegetable, tubs of lard, sacks of flour and meal, raw, salted meat—she couldn’t eat this!

“Hello?” she said uncertainly. “L-little friend?”

Two bright green eyes glittered in the darkness.

“Well. I see you’ve finally managed to arrange something more substantial for me. This is *almost* enough to make a decent meal!”

“Oh, little friend,” Molly wept, “what’s the use? They’ll just keep expecting me to eat more and more, and I have nothing left to give you!”

“Never fear. I will give them such a performance, none will ever doubt you again. And as for

payment—perhaps we could arrange for you to give me something in the future.”

“Give you what?”

“Why, your firstborn child! When you have one, of course.” The woman smiled, showing so many teeth Molly wondered that they could all fit in that little mouth.

“My—oh! I...but I can't. I can't!”

“Think of it like this: if you die here today, you'll lose all your future children. Isn't it best to lose just one instead?”

“I...” Molly gulped. She couldn't believe what she was about to agree to. But what the little woman said was true. “Very well. I agree. My firstborn child, when I have one, if you eat everything in this pantry.”

“Done!” said the little woman, and immediately dove headfirst into a pile of fifty-pound rice bags. The bags deflated before Molly's eyes as the woman sucked in the rice. When she was done, she gulped down the empty bags one by one.

“By the way,” she told Molly, “you can take or leave my advice, but on the night I met you, you bulged. On the next night, you bulged more. If I were the one opening the door tomorrow, and I saw neither food nor bulge, I might be a little suspicious of just where all that food really went.”

Molly nodded, feeling a little sick. She'd already overindulged two nights in a row, and didn't relish the thought of doing it again, but once again, the little woman was right. She'd better bulge.

Just one more night of this, she sighed to herself, and set off to glut herself on whatever was more-or-less edible. She ate five apples, one, two, three, four, five, while the little woman polished off five sides of beef, one, two, three, four, five. She munched on peanuts and crunched on day-old bread while her partner in piggishness slurped down raw ingredients by the hundreds of pounds.

Soon Molly had once more eaten all she could hold, but the little woman was still going. She ate spices straight from the jars. She ate the jars. She pulled up the floorboards and ate them too, the heavy oak planks splintering under her little white teeth. Molly put her hands on her stomach, once again safely bulging, and watched as her magical helper gulped down everything in the room.

Sated and sleepy, Molly let her eyelids droop lower and lower, until—

Snap! She woke to the sound of jangling keys.

The room was bare. She was sure it had been no dream now. The floorboards were still gone, and even on the hungriest day of her life she couldn't have eaten a *floor!*

The adviser gaped. The king applauded. Molly just grinned sheepishly and covered a small burp.

The wedding was held that very day. A team of seamstresses swarmed into Molly's new chambers to construct a dress around her, and while she was feeling none too slender after her three nights of enforced gluttony, they managed to make her look even more beautiful than usual—which almost made up for the dress being so tight she could scarcely move.

And then they bustled her up the alter, and she married the prince.

Molly was now Princess Molly. She'd never really wanted that. She'd certainly never wanted to marry someone she'd only just met. But the prince proved to be a very sweet young man. He was soft-spoken and a little shy, but passionate about his kingdom. He was fit and tanned, with wavy golden hair and a charming dimple that appeared when he grinned. Most importantly, unlike his father, he didn't try to motivate her to do things by locking her up and threatening to kill her. In fact, he was actually pretty embarrassed about that whole business, and apologized profusely.

Molly forgave him, because despite the rather dreadful way they'd met, she discovered that she actually liked the prince. Soon after that, she discovered she loved him. And not long after that—about nine months or so—she gave birth to an apple-cheeked baby boy, and if he wasn't quite as big as a giant, nobody in the royal family was complaining.

Always in the back of Molly's mind was her promise, and for days after the birth she started at every shadow and refused to let the baby out of her sight for a second. But those days turned into weeks, and then into months, and she began to think perhaps the little woman had forgotten about her.

Perhaps she didn't want someone else's child after all. Or perhaps—and the more time passed, the more likely this seemed—perhaps it had, somehow, all been a dream after all.

A year to the day after the birth of their child, Molly and the prince were relaxing in their private chambers. Molly had the baby on her lap. This was getting harder and harder lately—the baby was getting bigger, and Molly's lap was getting smaller. Over the last two years, she'd gone from buxom to voluptuous to downright plump. At first it had been the pregnancy, and then it had been nerves, and after that, well, it had simply been constant access to a steady supply of rich delicacies from the royal kitchens, combined with a new lifestyle that featured a lot less millwork and a lot more sitting.

She picked up a bonbon from the overflowing basket next to her chair, bit into it, and sighed with happiness.

“Hello, Molly,” the little woman said as she stepped out of the shadow of the chair and laid her head on Molly's knees.

Molly gasped and dropped the bonbon. Quick as a snake, the little woman's tongue flicked out and snatched it into her mouth. She smiled.

“Royalty has been good to you, hasn't it? I scarcely recognized you under all that—*finery*. And what a charming baby you have here! I knew you'd make me a good one.”

The prince stood up and drew his sword, but the little woman only had to gesture once and he froze like a statue. Molly stiffened and pulled the baby close to her. “No. I know what I said, but I can't give him up.”

“Oh, but we made a deal, didn't we?” The little woman prodded the baby and licked her lips. “So nice and juicy! He'll be delicious.”

“No!” Molly gasped.

“Yes!” the little woman said. “Now hand him over nicely, or I'll eat you and your husband for an appetizer.”

“Please,” Molly begged. “I'm wealthy now! Powerful! I can get you money, land, treasure, anything you want!”

“Oh, but I'm a simple woman. All I want is a good meal. And there aren't many dishes that can satisfy *my* extraordinary appetite.”

“You want food?” Molly asked desperately. “I'll feed you! I'll feed you anything...anything except...!”

“Hmm,” the little woman said, stroking her chin. “Very well. Feed me dinner. A real dinner, mind you, not like those crumbs you gave me before. I'll give you three days to fill me up with whatever you can, and if I'm still hungry at the end of the three days—it's down the hatch for Junior there!” She laughed, showing off her sharp little teeth.

“Come to the great hall at the stroke of midnight,” Molly said defiantly. “I'll feed you until you burst, you little demon!”

The little woman nodded, stepped back into a shadow, and disappeared. The prince stumbled as he was suddenly freed.

“Who was that creature?” he asked.

“I'm sorry I didn't tell you about her—but there's no time now! We must put out the call to the whole *kingdom*. The palace needs food! *Lots of food!*” Molly remembered the way the woman had torn through the pantry like it was nothing, and shuddered. “And quickly!”

Soon the road to the palace was lined with wagons, their wheels creaking under heavy loads of meat and grain, and every oven in the great kitchens roared. The table in the great hall was buried under towering heaps of food.

“This must be enough—” the prince protested, but Molly shook her head.

“I've seen her eat,” she said grimly. “We need more food.”

At the stroke of midnight, the little woman appeared. She rubbed her hands together gleefully and dug into the feast. She ate so fast her hands and face became a blur. The table was emptying rapidly.

“We need more!” Molly cried. “Send to every village, every hamlet, everyone must cook whatever they can and send it to the palace!”

The little woman ate, and ate, and ate, as the hands of the clock rolled past dawn and into morning. And as she ate, she began, very slowly, to grow larger. Her cheeks began to puff. The laces of her tunic tightened. Her legs bulged like sausages. By lunchtime, she was double the size she'd been before. By sunset, she was triple. And still she ate, until the hands of the clock met at midnight again and the table was bare.

“I thought you were going to feed me,” she told Molly, grinning. “Where's the food?”

“It's coming!” Molly said desperately.

“I'll wait,” the little woman said, leaning back in her chair and putting her arms behind her head. She plopped her feet down on the table and closed her eyes. “Just don't keep me waiting long. I'm wasting away.”

Wasting away! Molly thought. *You're a little piglet!*

But as round as she'd become, the little woman certainly didn't seem to be getting any *fuller*. She hadn't slowed her eating once all day, and didn't look even the least uncomfortable. She hummed and sang a song to herself as she rested.

“There's just one food that fills me up—”

Molly's ears perked up. Had she heard that right? She approached the little woman's chair as the song began again. If she could just hear the whole thing—

The little woman turned around in her chair, but stopped singing at once when she saw Molly behind her. “Ah ah ah,” she chided, waving one chubby finger. “If you've got time to stand around, you've got time to fetch me more to eat!”

Molly stifled a snarl of frustration and turned away. At least she knew one thing—there was a food that could fill the little woman up. If she could just figure out what it was...

The next day, as carts began arriving from the corners of the kingdom, she began feeding the little woman everything she could think of, systematically, starting off with fifty pounds of aardvark sausage, followed by bushels of apples and apricots and on and on and on. The little woman gorged her way along the length of the alphabet, finishing up with zebra fritters, and still she showed no signs of filling up.

By the end of the day, she'd grown so fat that her sides spilled over the arms of the throne, and still she ate. By midnight she'd outpaced the carts and chefs again, and the table was bare.

“You'd better go get more, if there *is* any more!” she laughed, her fleshy body jiggling. “Or maybe it would be better if you gave up and handed over that baby before your stubbornness causes a famine.”

“I'll see what I can do,” Molly said, bowing, and walked away, dragging her feet. She stopped by the door and waited until the little woman started singing again, and then she crept back as quietly as she could.

The little woman stopped for a moment and seemed to be listening. Molly held her breath. The chair creaked and groaned as the little woman tried to turn and look, but she'd grown so fat that she was wedged between the armrests. Soon she gave up trying. And soon after that, she began singing again. Her singing voice was light and soft, halfway between a purr and a sigh, but underneath the sweetness was something ancient and cruel and gleeful.

I'm the biggest, greatest eater

Who has ever eaten

By the pound or ton or liter

I never shall be beaten

I will eat the finest dishes

*I will eat a moldy shoe
I will eat your loaves and fishes
And I just might eat you!*

*I can guzzle lake or fountain
And never quench my thirst
I'll grow fatter than a mountain
And yet I'll never burst*

*I'll scrape the forests from the earth
And pluck clouds from the sky
And then just to increase my girth
I'll drink the ocean dry*

*And though it's true I'll deign to sup
On pilchard, pie, or pickle,
There's just one food that fills me up—
Peppered pumpernickel!*

Hearing this, Molly stole away as quietly as she could to the kitchens and gave the exhausted cooks and scullery maids one last order before snatching a few precious hours of sleep.

She trudged into the dining hall around sunrise to find the little woman almost oozing out of her chair. The desperate stewards had chopped up the other chairs and fed them to her, then the table, then the carpet, and then most of the rest of the palace furniture and several wagonloads of sand and gravel. She drummed her fat fingers impatiently on her immense stomach.

“I hope you've got some real food for me,” she complained. She paused to belch, scattering fine white grains across the bare stone floor. “You're not going to fill me up with sand, so don't bother.”

“I know,” said Molly primly. “Your breakfast is on the way. I think you'll find it filling. Can't you smell it?”

The doors of the great hall burst open and several serving maids staggered in, barely able to move with exhaustion and the great weight they carried. It was a loaf of fresh brown pumpernickel the size of a vat of beer.

The little woman inhaled deeply. “Smells delicious,” she said, grinning. “Just like the all that pumpernickel I ate yesterday when we were going through the Ps.”

“Oh, it isn't done yet,” Molly said. “Ladies!”

Each maid pulled out a pepper grinder and began grinding. Pepper flew like a black blizzard. Soon every inch of the huge loaf was thickly crusted.

The little woman's eyes widened, then narrowed. “I'm not eating that,” she snorted. “It's disgusting!”

“It's better than wood and sand. You said I could try to fill you up with ah—ah—ahchoo!—*anything*, remember? Or are you giving up?”

“Of course not!” the little woman snarled.

“Good. Ladies, feed our guest and make sure she doesn't miss a crumb. I'll go tell the kitchens to start another loaf.”

The maids stifled their sneezes, blinked back their tears, and began cutting huge slices of steaming, piping hot pumpernickel.

The little woman didn't devour it in a blur this time. She nibbled. She took dainty bites. But the maids made sure she never stopped eating, and in time the first slice disappeared, then the second, and finally the entire loaf.

She hiccuped and rubbed her stomach. “Delicious,” she burped. “Now I think I’ll try those tapestries—”

“Now I think you’ll try more pumpernickel,” Molly said, and another loaf was wheeled in, even bigger than the first one.

All day long, they fed the little woman pumpernickel toast, pumpernickel cookies, pumpernickel biscuits, pumpernickel twists, pumpernickel pudding, and even pumpernickel pizza, and all of it drowning in the finest, freshest pepper. By noon the armrests of the throne finally cracked and let her bulging flanks spill over the edges. By late afternoon the legs gave way and her enormous body crashed to the floor. By nightfall, her breathing was labored, her skin was pale and slick with sweat, and her fat face was turning sickly shades of green and yellow. She refused to admit it, but she was stuffed to the very edge of bursting.

“Only a few minutes to go!” Molly announced. “And we have a selection of peppered pumpernickel pastries for you. Let’s start you off with a gross of cupcakes.”

The little woman groaned and tried to wave them away, but she was so weak and full and sluggish she could barely jiggle her arms. Maids tottered on ladders, reaching over the vast expanse of her body to stuff one cupcake after another into her mouth.

“En—ough,” she groaned.

“What was that?”

“Enough,” the little woman repeated. A single peppery tear rolled down her puffy cheek. “I can’t...eat...another...bite.”

“Good!” Molly said triumphantly. “Then you won’t need to eat my son!”

“I’ll never need to eat anything!” the little woman said, suddenly angry. “I’ll be full for *years*, thanks to you! Think of all the children who’ll go uneaten—all those tender babies wasting away and spoiling into rotten adults—ooh, it makes me so mad I could—!”

She let out a long, deafeningly loud belch, which shook the walls of the castle and sent stone dust falling from the ceiling. Underneath her, the floor cracked, and then the crack widened.

“Uh-oh,” the little woman said, and then the floor collapsed beneath her massive weight and she crashed down into the wine cellar, and through that into the dungeons, and through that into the old troll warrens, and through that into who knows where, and for all anyone knows, she’s still falling.

It would be nice to say everything was perfect after that, but it wasn’t. The castle was ruined and the royal treasury went bankrupt to the last coin paying to import food from the surrounding countries. On top of that, the old king had disappeared. Nobody knew where he went, though a guard did report seeing him sneaking down to the wine cellar for a nightcap just before midnight.

The prince and Molly were declared king and queen, but they were a king and queen with no money. They sold the castle as a fixer-upper and used the last of their fortune to buy a mill on the river, which Molly taught her husband how to run.

After a year of millwork, Molly’s muscles were strong again, and her waist was trimmer, but it would never again be as trim as it was. That’s because the king proved to be a lousy miller, but a wonderful baker. He opened a shop next to the mill and used fresh flour and meal to make amazing delicacies. Everyone in the kingdom loved them, but Molly loved them the best, and she ate so many of them that she remained plump to the end of her days.

That bakery still stands. Nowadays there’s a buxom blonde woman behind the counter and a whole crowd of children playing outside, and upstairs by the fire is a very old man who will tell you this story, if you ask. Then he’ll probably suggest you buy something from the bakery. He recommends the peppered pumpernickel. It isn’t especially good, but once upon a time it saved his life.