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Vittore Carpaccio (ca 1460/6-1525/6), detail from *The Dream of Saint Ursula*. See page 298.

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Vittore Carpaccio (circa 1460/6-1525/6)

Detail From The Dream of Saint Ursula, 1495

THE SLEEPING PRINCESS PICTURED ON THIS month's cover could be Sleeping Beauty, waiting for a charming prince to awaken her with a kiss and end her slumber of 100 years. Or she could be the princess from the story of the princess and the pea, who had such delicate skin that her sleep was disturbed by a pea buried beneath 20 mattresses and featherbeds.

Instead, she is Princess Ursula, daughter of good King Norus of Brittany in the 5th century AD. According to legend,¹ Ursula was famous far and wide for her beauty, virtue, and wisdom, and she had many suitors. One day the king of Anglia sent his ambassadors to ask for Ursula's hand in marriage to his only son. Ursula did not want to say no, because it was a worthy offer; and besides, the king of Anglia was powerful and might not take rejection lightly. On the other hand, she did not want to say yes, because she was a good Christian girl and did not want to betray her faith by marrying a heathen prince. So, the clever princess agreed to marry the Prince of Anglia only after a waiting period of 3 years, during which he would be baptized and tutored in Christianity.

Meanwhile, Ursula herself embarked on a 3-year pilgrimage to Rome, in part to preserve her pious virginity a little longer. Taking full advantage of being a princess, she asked her father and future father-in-law for 10 virgins to accompany her. She and her 10 companions were each provided with another 1000 virgins for company and service during the voyage.

The grand traveling party of 11 011 virgins set sail up the Rhine in a fleet of ships. One night during a stop in Cologne, an angel visited Ursula in a dream and revealed her future martyrdom. Carpaccio shows the princess sleeping peacefully by herself in a double bed just as the angel arrives. She has taken off her crown for the night and set it neatly at the foot of the bed. Her dainty shoes await on the carpet nearby. (Unlike Cinderella, Ursula evidently wore Birkenstocks.)

From Cologne, the expedition sailed on to Basel, then continued on foot over the Alps and into Rome. Along the way, the charismatic Ursula converted all of the virgins to Christianity and inspired many awed onlookers to join

the pilgrimage. After giving his blessing, the pope himself abdicated the papacy and joined Ursula's entourage. Then, the party headed homeward. But when they reached Cologne again, the city was besieged by the Huns, who attacked the travelers. Ursula was shot through the heart with an arrow, becoming a martyred saint.

(The legend of St Ursula gained considerable grandeur centuries ago through misinterpretation of a single character in a stone inscription at the Church of St Ursula in Cologne. The stone carver wrote "X I M V," probably an abbreviation for the Latin phrase meaning "11 martyred virgins." But the M was read as a Roman numeral and the phrase interpreted as "11 000 virgins"—which is a great many virgins.)

Carpaccio's image of the sleeping princess is part of a large cycle of paintings that he completed in Venice to commemorate St Ursula's life and death. The Catholic Order of Ursulines, named in her honor, is dedicated to the education of young women. St Ursula is a patron saint of teachers and of students, especially girls.

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REFERENCE

1. de Voragine J. *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*. Ryan WG, trans. Vol II. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 1993.

