

CHERYL BURMAN



cindy
&
the beastly prince

Cindy and the beastly prince

‘Why? Why do I always miss out?’

Cindy kicked the glowing log which had collapsed into the embers. Sparks showered her tattered skirt, adding tiny burns to the grease spots and dirt.

‘It’s because I’m the pretty one, under all this ...’ she told the cat, which licked its fur. ‘They can’t bear the thought of their ugly faces being compared with my beauty so they hide me away.’

She plumped onto the stool and stretched her toes to the re-kindled fire. ‘All Hallows Eve, and here I am stuck in the kitchen like an old woman instead of at the ball haunting the gorgeous young men with my magical beauty. There must be a way, there must. Oh, how I wish ...’

‘Wish, do you? To go to the All Hallows ball?’

‘Who? What? How did you get in here?’

‘If you can’t work that out, you don’t deserve to go to the ball. I’m your fairy godmother of course.’

‘Fairy? You can make my wish come true?’

‘I can. If you insist, that is. There’re some things you should know first.’

‘Know? Forget it. Just get me there!’

§

Cindy lifted her satin skirts and layers of frothy petticoats, pointed her glass slippers and stepped gracefully through the palace door.

‘Invitation?’ The footman held out a hand.

‘Oh no, silly me!’ Cindy pressed a white-gloved hand to her swan-like throat and let tears well in her mascara’d blue eyes. ‘I left it in the golden coach, and now the bewigged and powdered groom has driven my four pure white horses away to rest while I dance the night away.’

‘No invitation, no –’

‘Allow me.’

A tall, dark and richly dressed man wearing a princely crown, held his hand out to Cindy. She took it, with a coy lift of her perfect eyebrows.

‘This beautiful princess – for surely she must be such – is my guest and she will indeed dance the night away – with me.’

Cindy and the dark stranger whirled around the ballroom floor, mesmerising the guests with their combined gorgeousness. Cindy subtly steered her handsome partner near to where her sisters stood. They were open-mouthed in astonishment and (Cindy loved this bit) envy at this unknown beauty who had stolen the prince’s heart.

Until ...

Bong!

'Midnight!' The prince bowed deeply to Cindy, who blushed and smiled a dimpled smile. 'An appropriate time to declare my choice of bride –'

Ping!

Cindy grabbed at the diamond clips holding her upswept hair in place, too late to save them flying across the room.

The prince appeared not to notice. 'My choice of bride –'

Thwack!

The elastic holding up Cindy's frilled bloomers snapped. Silk slithered down her stockinged legs.

Bong!

Midnight! How had Cindy not known the fairy's spell would come undone at midnight?

Crack! The heel of one glass slipper lay horizontal on the polished floor.

Bong!

How many strokes was that? Cindy couldn't wait to count. She wriggled out of her bloomers, kicked off the glass slippers and ran from the ballroom, hair streaming in curling tails.

Behind her, the prince cried, 'My bride! My bride!'

§

Next morning, the sisters were full of the story. In between ordering Cindy to cook extra eggs and bacon for breakfast and complaining the coffee was too cold and the plates too hot, they gossiped over the evening's drama.

'The prince is furious!' the fattest one exclaimed.

'Livid!' echoed the one with the wispiest hair.

'Wait until he catches her!' The one with the most acne'd skin clasped her hands to her flat chest. 'His full beast came out –'

'It was after midnight dear, that's when his beast does come out. Everyone knows that, you silly thing.'

'But so much roaring and clawing. He'll rip her to shreds, gobble her up like a lamb chop.'

'And so he should. Fancy snubbing our prince, running away like she was too good for him.' The fattest one sniffed and wiped egg yolk from one of her chins.

'It's only a matter of time.' The wispy-haired one leaned towards her sisters to whisper, 'I hear his servants are going house to house with that silly tiny glass slipper, and when they find the owner...!'

Each sister glanced at her feet. Their sighs of deep satisfaction that not one of them could squeeze a toe into that glass slipper hid Cindy's nervous gulp. She slipped out to the yard with a wooden bucket to fetch water, and to think.

She gazed across the garden wall, hoping for an idea. Under a pale blue sky, the trees spread to the horizon, glowing with autumnal reds and golds.

From the house, a sister called, 'Cindy, come back in and open the door. The prince's servant is knocking. Hurry!'

Autumnal reds and golds. Trees. A forest.

Cindy glanced behind her. Only the cat was there, sitting in weak sunlight licking its fur. Cindy upended the bucket at the base of the wall, grabbed the topmost stones and swung herself over. She fell with a solid thud.

‘Cindy!’

Cindy ran.

§

Dusk came earlier, darker and colder under the autumn canopy. A drizzling rain fell and Cindy shivered, wishing she had fetched her ragged shawl before her brave escape. Twigs stabbed her feet through her thin-soled shoes, trees dripped cold rain and wet leaves down the back of her neck, but she ran on, desperate for shelter before true night fell.

Darkness settled. Cindy’s heart beat hard against her ribs at heavy rustling in the branches overhead and at the hooting of owls searching for scurrying prey. Flickering white lights darted across her path, danced around her shoulders, and disappeared. Her shivers worsened. Hunger pains stabbed at her stomach, her toes were frozen and her legs ached with the strain of having to run.

She would die out here.

And then, a light. One which remained steady and glowed yellow. Like a lamp. Cindy ran towards it.

No no no, the boughs of the trees groaned as she passed.

Mustn’t, mustn’t, whispered the leaves.

Stay away, stay away, the owls hooted.

Yellow, warm, human light. Cindy lifted the massive door knocker, let it bang, and sank to the cold stone of the doorstep.

§

Cindy woke to find herself still lying on stone. And still cold, although not the deathly cold of the forest. She raised herself on her elbows and blinked.

A tall, wide room with high shuttered windows. Shelves of books. A long table loaded with jugs, mugs, bottles and phials as far as Cindy could see from her place on the flagged floor. At the far end, a fire roared, piled so high with logs Cindy was sure the chimney must soon be ablaze. And in the middle of the flames, a pot hung on a tripod, both pot and tripod glowing hotly red.

‘She wakes.’

The voice – old and cool – came from behind Cindy. She scrambled up, took a moment to find her balance and sought the voice out. It could have come from any one of three crones lined up on a frayed couch. Grey hair straggled in thin ribbons either side of their wrinkled, white faces. Six black peas of eyes squinted at Cindy.

‘She wakes indeed.’ The middle hag’s thin lips opened around a black hole of a mouth. ‘The spirits of All Hallows have sent her to us.’

‘To replace that slut Aurora.’ Another hag spat out the name like venom.

‘Who abandoned us.’ The middle hag creaked to her feet, swaying. She pointed a skeletal finger at Cindy. ‘For a man,’ she hissed.

Her sisters stood also, all three swaying, hissing, 'For a man, a man, a man.'

'And after feeding and clothing her since she was a squalling, pooping babe, thrust upon us.' The middle hag let out a phlegmy sigh and used her skeletal finger to summon Cindy.

Cindy stepped towards her, not understanding how her legs could betray her so.

'But we are content, now.' The hag smirked. 'Can you light a fire, girl? Bake a loaf? Peel a potato?' She cackled. 'Empty chamber pots? And rat traps?'

Her sisters cackled too.

§

Cindy was woken before sunrise by the black cockerel which later in the morning would peck her legs when she fed the hens. She dusted, swept, cooked, washed, and emptied chamber pots and rat traps. If she rebelled, her legs carried her to the chore regardless, and with streaks of pain crucifying the soles of her feet as if she was treading on shards of glass.

She longed for her ugly sisters. She longed for her fireplace and dirty ashes. These things were denied her, however. She was unable to go beyond the well, a short distance from the cottage. If she tried to leave the gloomy dank hollow where the cottage squatted – its shuttered eyes blind to the beauty of the forest beyond – she was instantly entangled in a thicket of brambles which were otherwise invisible to her.

One thing kept Cindy from total despair. Each dawn, as she was drawing water, the sound of singing floated through the frost to touch her careworn heart.

Heigh ho, heigh ho... the singers chanted, the rest of the words lost in mist and distance.

Cindy longed for the singers more than she longed for her old life.

§

All Hallows Eve came. One year since Cindy wished to go to the ball.

The hags fussed all day, demanding Cindy wipe away the streaks of slime which stained their dresses when brewing their cauldron potions, polish their black boots until they shone like beetles' wings, and comb their greasy locks into something resembling a style. They invited a friend to join their beautifying. The friend – as painfully ugly as the three fairies and smelling for some reason of sugar and spice mixed with snails and puppy dogs' tails – brought a box of gingerbread to share. She didn't offer any to Cindy, who was glad as the gingerbread appeared to have been left out in the wind and the rain.

Cindy held back her revulsion, did as bade, and saved her cut feet from further pain. As the sun set, the hags pulled besom brooms from a cupboard Cindy hadn't noticed before. They strode the brooms and faced the door of the cottage.

'No All Hallows Eve ball for you tonight,' one jeered with a lift of her warty nose at Cindy.

'And don't think our absence means we're not watching you.' Another arched her scrawny eyebrows. 'Because we are,' she hissed.

They flew out the door, one after the other, their gleeful screeches echoing through the trees. Cindy ran outside, looked up. There they flew, silhouetted against a fat silver moon and joined by dozens, hundreds more.

Cindy returned to the fire to warm her cold toes and fingers. She gazed into the flames for a very long time, dredged in self-pity. She sat there past midnight, wallowing in misery

like a pig in mud. She sat until near dawn, her heart broken with longing. At last she stretched her arms, and took herself back to a year ago. Where was her fairy godmother now?

‘There are things you should know,’ she mocked herself. She pressed her dry lips together and blew out a disgusted breath. ‘I wish I could leave here, find the singers I hear each dawn. I’d be happy with them, I know.’

‘New wishes, hey?’

Cindy sprang from her stool, ignoring the pain in her feet.

‘About time! Yes, yes, new wishes please!’

‘You wish to find the singers in the Forest?’

‘I do, I do!’

‘Very well, if you insist. There are things you should know first.’

‘Know?’ Cindy hesitated, cast around her at the dusty book-lined shelves, the blackened cauldron, the uneven flags of the floor. She shuddered. ‘Forget it. Just get me out of here!’

The door opened of its own accord. A beam of fading moonlight shone through, beckoning Cindy into the greying night. She took a step forward, and cried out in delight. Her feet no longer felt as if hot blades sliced into them. She skipped to the doorway, kept skipping, following the moonbeam path with thudding heart into the garden and, miraculously, past the well.

A shadow fell over the setting moon and Cindy’s heart thudded for a different reason. Far above her, three witches flew, slowly and raggedly as if exhausted beyond words, but ever nearer. She ran, across the gloomy dell and into the trees. No invisible thorns barred her way.

Cindy kept running, soon guided not by the moon, but by the pale golden fingers of an autumn dawn.

Singing came from deeper within the forest.

Heigh ho.. heigh ho... it's off to work we go ...

The rest was lost to Cindy. She didn’t care, for the sound was closer than it had ever been. She stopped running, put her hands to her hips and bent over, breathing hard. When at last she could draw breath, she grinned. Wider and wider she grinned until her mouth broke into a laugh. Louder and louder Cindy laughed.

Those three old bats could do their own washing and cleaning and cooking and getting pecked by the cockerel now. She was free of them. And soon to find her singers and live happily ever after. She skipped again, towards the sound of singing.

And came across the sweetest, rose-clad cottage nestling in a sunny hollow. A thatched roof, red shutters flung wide and white smoke coiling from a yellow-stone chimney, captured her heart like a fairytale come true.

Doubtless this was where the singers lived. Cindy smiled and walked to the door. She knocked, not expecting an answer as the residents had heigh ho’ed off to work. So the sound of the latch being lifted on the inside and the gentle creak of the door opening sent her stumbling back a step.

'Hello?' A truly beautiful young woman peered out at Cindy. Her red red lips curved in a soft smile, her blue blue eyes sparkled a welcome. Her hair was black and shiny as a raven's wing and her skin as whitely unblemished as new snow. She wore a pale yellow dress and a spotless apron.

Cindy squirmed, horribly aware of her grubby face, tangled, unwashed hair and torn, tatty clothes. She had an urgent desire to be clean, untangled, and to wear a pale yellow dress. Possibly without the apron, which suggested more cooking, cleaning and washing.

'I seek the singers I hear each dawn,' she said.

'The dwarves.' The beautiful young woman laughed a golden laugh. 'Off to work in the mines, collecting gold and priceless gems. It will be they you hear.'

Gold and priceless gems?

'They live here?'

'Oh yes. So kind and gracious, well, perhaps not Grumpy.'

The young woman's sad little smile cleaved Cindy's heart. She steeled it against further compassion. This must be what the fairy godmother had wanted to tell her, that there was more happiness to be had here than the singers themselves.

'I've come seeking help.' Cindy brushed her eyes with the back of a dirty hand. 'My little brother and sister are lost in these woods. I'm in despair! The last thing they said to me was how they were determined to find the gingerbread cottage they'd glimpsed when our parents took them out walking last week.' She clasped her hands in prayer and blinked at the beautiful young woman. 'You don't know where that might be, do you?'

'Oh no!'

The young woman's horror sent Cindy's heart into a frantic fluttering. She steeled it against further panic.

'Tell me!'

'A witch lives there, one who is said to ...' The young woman's tears overflowed and Cindy had to wipe her own snivelling nose on her filthy sleeve. '... eat children.' She whispered it, her blue blue eyes wide with distress.

'I must rescue them!' Cindy cried, and fell to her knees in a state of exhaustion which wasn't too faked. She really was very tired after not sleeping all night and running through the trees.

The young woman ran to her, helped Cindy to her feet and led her into the cottage. A large old wooden table covered in baking utensils and a billowing bowl of dough, took up much of the space. A fire burned brightly, with a pot of savoury-smelling stew bubbling away above it. The windows sparkled, the wooden dresser and eight chairs gleamed, the stone floor was swept clean as the ugly sisters' plates after a roast chicken dinner. Cindy cared nothing for this. Her keen eyes had spotted a large, wooden, iron-banded chest against the wall. In her fanciful mind, the chest was crammed with gold and precious gems.

She collapsed into a chair with a long, drawn out groan, lay her arms on the table and rested her head on them. She heaved her shoulders.

'I cannot stay, not for one moment!' she wailed. 'That wicked witch may have eaten my poor sweet siblings already.' She gulped great sobs.

The young woman stood beside her, patting Cindy's shoulder. 'You cannot go, you're exhausted and doubtless hungry and thirsty.' She drew in a heavy breath. 'I will go. I know where this gingerbread house is. She won't eat me, for she knows the dwarves would have their revenge.' She paused, and then, in a determined voice, repeated. 'I will go.'

And she went, first taking off her apron and donning a red cape and a face as fearful as if she was about to do battle with a wolf.

Cindy closed the door behind the young woman, watched until she entered the trees and then glanced at the great chest. She wandered over. No lock! She was about to lift the lid when there was a polite knocking at the door. Damn.

She peered out a window. An old crone carrying a basket of apples stood there. She turned her head, spotted Cindy, and smiled a gap-toothed smile.

'Apples for sale!' she cried.

With a tut at the delay, Cindy opened the door to explain she had no coin so couldn't buy apples. Perhaps the crone might come by another day when the dwarves were in?

'No problem, dearie.' The crone winked, which startled Cindy, and held out a ruby red apple. 'Have this one on me, dearie. So's you can tell the dwarves what good apples they are.'

Cindy's stomach rumbled already at the savoury smell from the pot. She knew she had no time to sup of its glories, however. She took the apple and bit into it ...

§

The dwarves arrived home as the sun was setting. No smoke coiled from the chimney. A burned smell filled the cold cottage, and the savoury stew was a blackened mass at the bottom of the cooking pot.

Worse, though, was the sight of their poor Snow White. She lay, apparently dead, half in, half out the open door. Some evil had been at work, tearing and dirtying her clothes, and disfiguring her beautiful face with scratches as if she had run through the forest at night. The dwarves barely recognised her as the beautiful young woman they had left that morning, singing over her bread dough.

Heartbroken, they cleaned her as best they could, smoothed salves over the grazes and laid her on a wooden bier. They could not bring themselves to bury her, so covered the bier with a glass lid and carried it to a sunlit clearing in the trees. They knew this was a favourite place of Snow White's to sing with the birds and the forest creatures. They mourned.

§

Winter passed, and spring and summer came to the forest. Word of the glass coffin and the sleeping princess in the clearing spread, until one day, in a palace, a restless, handsome prince heard of it.

Glass? The prince cradled the tiny glass slipper he always carried in his deep pocket, and humphed. He had chafed at the unknown beauty's desertion, worrying at it like a canker on the tongue. An ulcerous bitterness clamped his heart like iron bands on a treasure chest.

Once darkness fell, the prince saddled his horse and rode out of the palace. The guards stood smartly aside. The prince smirked and pushed his horse faster.

And so it was, that just on midnight, the prince came to the clearing where starlight glittered on the glass coffin. He peered inside, and with eyes that could now see in the darkness, recognised the gorgeous princess who had fled from the All Hallows Ball – and him – nearly two years ago. He growled, a low, deep beastly growl. As his fingers turned to talons he toppled the glass lid from the bier and bent his lion-like head over the sleeping form. He breathed hot animal breath into her white face and watched as the warmth raised pinkness in her cheeks.

Her eyelids twitched. The beastly prince tilted his head to one side, his strong white teeth bared in what might be a smile, or a snarl.

Cindy opened her eyes.

The End

This story is taken from *Dragon Gift*, a collection of stories with fairytale, myth or fairytale-like themes of varying length and gravity.

Cheryl Burman's stories, flash fiction and parts of her novels have been long and shortlisted and awarded prizes in competitions including Flash500, Retreat West, Stroud Short Stories and the Historical Writers Association.

Dragon Gift is available [here](#)

To see all the author's works, visit her at cherylburman.com

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