

# CINDY, REALLY

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A Short Story by Timothy A. Freriks

The shoe fit. She knew it would; it was hers, after all. She had stuffed it into the young man's pocket as she left the masquerade ball.

Prince Robert raised his widened eyes to hers. "It's you, isn't it? I was hoping I had found you. I couldn't stop thinking about you."

Cindy looked into his familiar and beautiful face, the strong, gentle brown eyes and full jaw. She didn't know what would happen if she told him the truth at the party, that she crashed it in a homemade gown. She couldn't have known that he would be so taken with her; she hoped, of course, all girls hope a prince would fall in love with them. But here, in fact, was a prince, a real prince, standing in front of her, asking if she was the girl that had captivated his heart. Many confusing thoughts tumbled through her but in the end, the fantasy was too attractive to let go.

She was glad she had scribbled her address on the sole of the canvas pump.

"Yes, my prince. I am she," she said. "I am Cindy Reeli."

"Cindy Reeli," he said, considering the quality of the name. He smiled, looked down at her, and his eyes softened. "I was afraid your mask covered a horrible monster. But you are as I had hoped. As beautiful as I knew you would be, and as... simple."

*Simple?* Oh well, Cindy was sure he meant to use a better word and she didn't want to destroy the mood that she was certain was forming here. "Thank you, my prince." She said, breathlessly, pulling at a long golden curl that had fallen on her forehead and leaning forward in what might have been seen as an ever so slight curtesy.

"Right," he said through a smile that had made so many English women swoon. "I know it's unexpected, but would you have time to have dinner tonight?" He straightened up and looked around at the living room, his expression, unreadable. "Do you like Italian? We could... jump in the limo and... grab a bite."

So much for fairy tale script. His attempt at common language was somewhat awkward. But it didn't matter; of course she would go with her prince. At 22 she had not learned everything about life yet but did know that fairy tales were only in books. Where real people 'grabbed' pizza (and royalty weren't real people after all, were they?), royalty did... well, something else. But he *was* a prince: the most eligible bachelor in all the land. And he was asking her for a date.

“It’ll take me a minute to change, my prince.” She said.

“Right. Something... funky... like your outfit last week. Jolly outrageous it was. Had everyone talking. Go throw on something smashing. And you may call me Rob when we’re alone together. There’s a dear.”

As she left the room on her way to the stairs, her step-mother and two step-sisters were pressed against the sides of the hall, mouths wide in disbelief. All eyes followed Cindy up the stairs, then, as she reached the top, the sisters stormed up after her, followed stodgily by the mother.

“You went to the big party at the Palace? How did you get in?” The sisters, who were both uglier than the other, fell onto the bed asking questions all at once.

Her step-mother, having finally entered the room, decided to take charge of the situation. “I want an explanation, young lady,” she spat out in her squeaky, high pitched voice as she shut the door behind her and scowled. “Exactly where did you meet this prince?”

“I got dressed up and went to the masquerade party,” Cindy said as she scurried around, throwing together this article of clothing and that. “I said I was Marlene Ferguson,” she giggled, “and they let me in, can you believe it? I acted royal and they let me in.”

“You disobeyed my orders, Cynthia. I told you that you couldn’t go unless you finished your housework.”

“But I did finish. I got it done quickly and got dressed and out the door before 9:30.” She looked at her step-sister. “By the way, I didn’t see you two at the party.”

The sisters looked nervously at each other, then the mother, who simply coughed a nervous cough. “No, we met some handsome young men and left early.”

“I hope you had a good time. I did. The prince danced with me almost all night. I think he likes me.”

The prince called from the bottom of the stairs. “Cindy?”

Cindy let her full, curly blond hair down with a shake of her head.

“He’s awfully rude,” one ugly sister said. “I’m glad I didn’t let him dance with me.”

“Me neither,” the other echoed.

“What is that awful outfit you have on, Cynthia,” her step-mother said as Cindy examined herself in the mirror. “Haven’t I taught you better than that?”

“Now, step-mother, I don’t like the high necks and the lace you want me to wear. These fabrics match and the colors work and I like it.” She turned to leave.

“Have you taken out the garbage?”

“No, step-mother, I have to go, my prince... Rob... is waiting. Can’t Beatrice or Margaret do it?”

“Oh, mother, I can’t,” said Beatrice with sudden pain crossing her face. “I have a terrible headache.”

“Me, neither,” voiced Margaret, “I just did my nails.”

“OK, OK,” said Cindy, defeated as usual. “I’ll take it out.”

She left them behind, went down the stairs and took Rob’s hand. “I’ll be right with you, Rob. I have to take out the garbage.”

His royal eyes widened at the sound of that duty; his role in life was not to face such mundane situations. But, true to his royal breeding, he handled the situation properly.

“Carl?” he yelled to his chauffeur, his eyes never leaving Cindy.

After Carl had firmly disposed of the garbage, he opened the door for an impatient prince who was feeling that the whole garbage incident was perhaps a sinister omen. But it didn’t matter. Prince Robert looked forward to being with Cindy again. She was tall and graceful had a body that she carried with almost royal bearing. But most of all, she was interesting and great fun and refreshing. Cindy was different from all the tight girls he was accustomed to; he was definitely smitten. And her style of dressing was so unusual—engaging, actually.

*Your stodgy public perception should be changed, his advisors had said. Appeal to the common people, be more a part of them, they said. Eat pizza, talk like they do. Listen to their music.* His public relations people agreed. Cindy was a good first step, they thought: judging from her address, she was common, but interesting, and it was good that he could be seen to appreciate the modern fashion as well.

“I know a great place in the west end, Sylvestro’s. I’m sure he can make pizza for me.”

“I know a better place, Rob. Gino’s. In SoHo. Yours is a bit... huffy.” It was more of a test than anything else; she wanted to know if he could handle restaurants with something less than red oxblood leather seats and violins. At the party, for brief moment she had seen a bit of a real person peeking out of the prince. She liked it and wanted to see that man again.

“Right. Gino’s it is.” He reached forward and tapped the glass. “Soho, Carl,” he said.

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They waited for about five minutes at the entrance for the cars in front to be moved. Obviously Carl had called ahead to arrange security; there were about a dozen very out-of-place men in suits about. Had their hair been spiked or worn nose rings, it wouldn't have been so obvious—that was the fashion of the neighborhood.

“What do you think, Rob?” Cindy said as she watched the prince recoil at, then study, his countrymen as they started to crowd around the limo. There were odds and ends of the “strange” district, as the “real” people called it, the punks with purple hair and loud clothes. It wasn't hard core—Cindy wouldn't spring that on Rob, yet—but it needed some adjustment.

“Do you... uh, like this sort of fashion, Cindy?” he asked.

“Not really, I like a mix of straight clothes and punk. I realize I live a world that has more than one group of people in it. I see a lot of people at the salon.”

“Salon?” He said, momentarily confused. Then recognition bit him. “Right. Your job. What is it that you do, exactly?”

“I'm a beautician. I fix hair and make-up and help people dress better. I like it and meet a lot of different people.”

“Right.” He slumped back into the plush seats. *Beautician, dear Lord, of all things.* He hadn't even considered she could be THAT common a person. It was difficult, but agreeable, to accept that she turned out to be a commoner, but a beautician? However, on second thought, maybe being with a beautician did have a crudeness about it that might appeal to the middle classes, such as they were. And wasn't that the point of this? *Or is it?*

The paparazzi showed up on time. *God only knows where they live*, Rob thought. In their cars, he suspected.

“All clear, your highness,” a security man called through the window.

Prince Robert nodded and the door was opened, flooding the car with the noises of the street and the questions and popping of the photogs with their Nikons and the commoners with their cell phones. “Be royal, my dear,” he said.

“But I'm not, Rob,” she said. “I'm just me.”

They climbed out of the car and strode proudly to the front door, Rob with his accustomed and simultaneous airs of detachment and belonging that royalty have learned over the centuries, and Cindy with an oddly natural confidence of a lady rightfully on the arm of the next King of

England. Nodding gently, she smiled to the nameless faces whose eyes scanned her from top to bottom. As she paused and allowed the flashes to explode around her, she felt a strange poise. It was like she instinctively knew her role. All mouths formed the same question.

*Who is she? Who is this woman?*

They were eagerly led to a prime table in the small cafe. A red and white checkered tablecloth had been hastily found and laid on the table and a candle hastily forced into an old wine bottle.

It was the most class Gino's had experienced in the last 80 years, if ever. The green linoleum floor shone brightly from untold the layers of wax that had managed to capture in its stratum the occasional slow-moving bug. Gino himself was hovering over every detail, mouth continually agog at his royal guest, alternately jabbering at the waiters, frowning at their slowness, and smiling and adjusting the furniture to make our path to the table easier. He was a heavy man, stout in girth and laden with a multitude of chins all quivering in unison with his stomach as he flitted around like a ballerina. His black hair was soaked already and the sweat was dripping off his bulbous nose onto the first of his chins. He would bring up the sleeve of his almost clean white shirt and dab his forehead then his chin, then flit and jabber and smile then dab again.

"My Prince, and lady. I am honored to have such..." His eyes finally landed on Cindy's and flew open even wider and he sucked in a breath. "... Cindy?" he stammered.

"Gino, so good to see you again. You know my friend, of course."

He rolled his eyes to Rob who nodded a royal nod and smiled a royal smile. "Delighted," said the prince. Rob didn't extend his hand.

"Your highness," Gino said and bowed, shifting his gaze back to Cindy, who nodded again. "Welcome to my humble restaurant. We are honored."

Cindy watched the prince as he looked around. The restaurant had partial fake brick panels over stucco which was meant to look like old Rome. There were brass wall-mounted coach lights and brass hanging lamps which intended to bring a little England into the place. Unfortunately, it looked like what it was—a poorly planned and cheaply decorated Italian restaurant like millions of other ones in the world. But Gino was proud of it and, although the lighting was too bright and the vinyl seats were too blue, he managed to produce London's finest Italian food, including pizza.

For as long as Cindy could remember, surely before her real mother's death, Gino had run the place. It still had the little Italian wine bottle collection that fascinated her as a child. Oh, she thought: *If mother and father could see me now*. But her mother had died when she was only 10 and her father remarried Agatha, a stout and angry woman with two stout, angry, and thoroughly

spoiled daughters. After her father died, she was forced to live with them. It was not a happy house and she could only dream about moving someday; cutting hair didn't pay well.

However, in the meantime, free rent allowed her to pursue and support her habit of creating wild and off-beat clothes. It was a habit that consumed her. She would find old clothes and new clothes and mix them together in a style that was, in the opinion of most of her friends, elegant. As her 'legend', as she called it, grew she created outfits for herself and her friends. When strangers wanted one, she charged.

"Pizza, my good man," Rob said to Gino. "Pepperoni and mushrooms."

It didn't matter that Cindy didn't like mushrooms; she probably had pressed her hand hard enough.

"Here, Gino." A greasy young man with sweat pouring down his face and his lungs pumping with exertion came to the table and handed Gino a bottle of wine. Gino looked at it and frowned, turned his back and ripped the *Brit Liquor* price tag, then cast a look at the boy that would have killed an older man. The boy wisely slunk away and Gino's smile returned instantly as he faced the special guests again.

"My finest wine." He snapped his fingers and a waiter appeared with a bottle opener and glass.

Rob graciously accepted a taste although his eyes had widened imperceptibly in moderate revulsion. But he was royal and he complemented the choice, drinking it as if it were Dom Perignon.

"So, Cindy, tell me about yourself; the parts you left out at the Ball."

She went through the story of how her father died and her mother died and she lives with her step-mother and step-sisters and works as a beautician and loves clothes. It took her thirty one seconds.

"OK," Rob said after a pause. He was not expecting such a short story. "Tell me about your real mother."

She talked about her mother and father and he talked about his, not in personal terms, as one might expect, but more as a surface, newspaper—type report: the events, the show, the pomp. Cindy thought she saw a sense of boredom with it all under the surface, and she liked that, it made him more real.

"Are you happy?" she asked abruptly.

His eyebrows went up then lowered as he studied his wineglass. He wasn't asked that question very often. "Sort of," he said. "I mean it's great and all that but, the cage is awfully tight. You know what I mean?"

"No," she replied honestly. How could she? "But I can see that it could get tiring being exposed all the time. Every move, every statement examined and reported."

"Yes, yes, exactly." His voice lowered and his eyes softened. "It's like I'm the little statue in a Faberge egg."

*That's a real common analogy, Rob,* she thought sarcastically. Rob was so trapped in his upper classness that he can't even put it down without being snobby. But, at the same time, Cindy understood.

The pizza thankfully interrupted her mental scramble for a reply.

The evening unfolded well enough: the pizza was excellent and the first bottle of wine led to two bottles. But always, Rob contained himself totally, royal to the Nth fiber, never laughing too loud or spilling a drop of wine or having a string of cheese hang out of his mouth. And he didn't go to the bathroom. It was an accomplishment that Cindy wondered whether it was attributable to royal upbringing or a large bladder.

After Rob thoroughly exhausted the subjects of polo and skiing, they talked freely. As they loosened up, she did see again the young man who captivated her, who caught himself revealing fears and desires, some hopes and even dreams. It was a beautiful evening.

"Superb meal, Gino," Rob said as they stood to leave. "I shall mention this to my friends. Well done." He left the mundane subject of paying to a subordinate. "We never carry cash," he whispered to her with a wink.

"Do you like the 'Pet Shop Boys'?" he said as he slid a CD into the limo's player. Its hard rock blared from exquisite speakers and she looked at him. He was obviously trying, and failing, to appear to enjoy it.

She reached over and switched it off. "You don't either," she said, much to Rob's relief. Her hand slid across the rack of CDs and pulled out some Beethoven sonatas. "This is much better, Rob."

He laughed, obviously relieved. "That's ever so much better. I personally hate hard rock. The people, however, expect me to like it... and everything else they like, for that matter."

"Ever think about what YOU really like?" she asked.

It took a minute to answer. “Not much, actually,” he said with a mixture of sadness, frustration, and defeat. “It gets very tiring. I am supposed to BE the people. That’s what my ‘people’ say.”

“Your people suck, Rob,” she said “You’re not the people. They know that.” Cindy gently pushed a lock of his fine deep red hair up off his forehead in a surprising affectionate way and touched his chin. “Rob. The people don’t know what THEY like either. If you can’t rely on your own feelings, what do expect the people to think? The easiest thing for everybody to do... is just figure out what feels right, and go for it. I think they expect that from you.”

Rob looked at her with a twinge of vulnerability in his eyes. “It’s very hard to know what the people think, or expect, of me. We don’t really... touch them. We say we do, but... And I’m a person, a real person, myself. It’s hard to understand this public admiration thing. It’s like we are... statues, you know, idols, or something.”

“To be a person, you have to know what you like, or at least be honest with yourself. People follow trends because they don’t know what they like. So they rely on other people to tell them what they like. Prince Robert is supposed to be stronger than that. More honest. He’s supposed to know himself and be comfortable with what he finds. You are royal. You have to be honest about that. You aren’t them.”

“Right.”

“Let the people see the real guy. You might be surprised what they like.”

They drove on in silence and Cindy could tell that Rob was thinking about her words. After 10 minutes, they pulled up at Cindy’s house. Rob turned to her. “You know, I really like you... very much, in fact. But I’ve been thinking that you’re absolutely right. I can’t become a part of the common people... it’s not my destiny. I may look like a fool if I try, and the people, after all, expect me to be... royal. But, I can still be me.”

“Being yourself is all we really expect. Try it.”

Prince Robert looked out the darkened window at the drab apartments across the street where several of his drab subjects were staring back. “Like it or not, I have to be this damn Royal person, but I can be honest, too. So I’m going to look at the way I really feel about things.” He looked into her deep brown eyes. “That’s really easier than trying to figure out how I ‘should’ feel, isn’t it?”

She nodded. “More honest. I think that’s the best anybody can do.”

“Thank you, Cindy.” He reached over and pulled her close then kissed her gently.



“Rob, they don’t want you to eat pizza in SoHo, or get your hair done on Water Road. But they want you to be real.” Cindy knew she would never see him again, at least alone. She kissed him lightly, stroked his face and got out of the car. At her front door she turned and waved.

He returned the wave with a royal nod and sat back as the limo pulled out and roared away. So much for fairy tales, she thought.

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The paper was on the table when she arose to make breakfast for her step-sisters and step-mother. A picture of her with Prince Robert fully jumped out at her and she picked it up. At least it would make a good souvenir, she thought until she read the caption.

#### PRINCE ROBERT WITH MYSTERY FASHION TRENDSETTER

*Fashion Trendsetter?* She felt her heart stop, but she read on. Apparently during the night, someone in his, or her, great wisdom decided that Cindy’s tossed-together outfit was some sort of new wave of fashion statements. She turned to the Fashion Section of the paper to continue the story. One of the Photogs had taken stunning pictures of her in SoHo and two of her dancing with the Prince at the Ball. They were very good shots and Cindy had to admit the outfits were very funky and interesting, and elegant. The article went on to speculate as to who this new jet-setter was; Paris? Nice? New York? Whoever it was, they wrote, the appearance at the Ball and the visit to a SoHo pizza parlor were brilliantly conceived to introduce a new line of commoner/royal clothes. She kept reading, dumfounded, when the phone rang.

The voice was a barely controlled screech. “Cindeeeee?” It was her friend that worked in Margaret’s, the international clothing manufacturer. “Cindy? OMG! Did you read the paper?”

“Yes, Bobbi, I can’t believe it. My clothes are in the paper!”

“They look fantastic. Where did you come up with that look? It’s great!”

“You know me, this and that, but... what do I do now?”

“I’ll talk to Margaret. She’ll certainly look at your stuff now. She’ll have to. The publicity is incredible.”

“I don’t like Margaret very much... her lines aren’t, well, you know... different. But you’re right, I have to take advantage of this crazy article. See what she says and get back to me.”

As soon as the phone was hung up in its cradle, it rang again.

“Cynthia? Cynthia Reeli?”

“This is Cindy Whitehorse. Reeli was my real parent’s last name.”

“Oh, OK... but this is Cynthia?”

“Cindy. Yes.”

“Good. William Motley gave me your number. He’s an investigator in London and we have been trying to find you since the paper came out. My name is Kathy Black, and I’m with DKNY in New York. We would like to fly you over here and talk about your design. Ms. Karan saw the pictures online and just went wild. It’s all over social media. Can you be in New York later this week?”

Cindy couldn’t answer. Her brain had gone into shock and she had trouble forming words. DKNY? Donna Karan went wild for my designs? New York? Her heart was pounding so loud she was sure Ms. Black would hear. She tried to talk but all that came out was gasps.

“We of course would pay all expenses,” the woman on the phone said after the silence.

“That’s... ” Cindy cleared her throat, “not the problem.” The problem was that her tongue had swollen up too much from excitement and she couldn’t get any words out.

“Oh, I see,” Kathy said quietly. “Well, I hope I’m not wasting my time.”

Cindy’s heart sank to the floor. *Don’t hang up!* She yelled in her mind. “No... I... ”

“Then you’re willing to negotiate? Good. It sounds like other labels have contacted you already and have probably made some overtures. I understand. We are willing to pay \$10,000 to interview you and ask you to listen to an offer for your designs. No strings attached. This is really more than I have been authorized to pay but I would like you to consider granting Ms. Karan an interview. I think we would be very competitive and I think we can offer a better package than the others.”

“I’m... sure you would,” Cindy choked out. “Uh... I don’t know... ” The rest of the sentence got caught and just hung there. The pause was loud.

“Fine, \$15,000, then. And you’re agreement not to sign with anyone else until after we meet? But that is the highest I can offer for the interview. Do we have a deal?”

She concentrated. Her brain knew the right words but her mouth had to force it into the telephone. “Yes,” she said, finally, “that would be fine. What would you... uh, expect me to bring?”

“Photos of your outfits, some samples, fabrics, you know, the usual.”

*What is the usual?* she wanted to scream. “Fine.”

“Excellent. My London office will call to make the arrangements. Thank you and... don’t make any deals until you talk to us. OK?”

“OK.”

She hung up the phone just as her step-sisters entered.

“What’s going on? The phone woke me up,” Beatrice said. “I have a headache now. And where is breakfast? Cindy? What about my breakfast? Cindy?”

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Over the next two days, Cynthia Whitehorse-Reeli put together a dozen outfits out of odds and ends that she and some of her friends had in their closets or she found at the charity store. Marty, her old boyfriend, took a series of splendid photos. The DKNY people called and she flew to New York, photos and fabrics and outfits in hand, to meet the legendary Donna Karan. Cindy Reeli was treated like a princess, paid the \$15,000 and taken on a blitz of New York nightlife. Then, in a glass-walled conference room high above New York, she submitted her portfolio.

It was accepted as a new wave of fashion. She signed a contract that would make her a millionaire off of the pre-committed sales of the designs she had just thrown together overnight. Her head was spinning as the press announcements were made. The reporters were reporting, the parties were partying and the work sessions were working. The frenzy was sweet.

The next six months of getting the ‘CindyReeli’ line ready for production were tedious but exciting. The more she sank into the business and the glamour and the opulence, the more she felt comfortable.

Cindy became confident in her role and talent and she started to feel like an insider, like this wasn’t a fluke. The *CindyReeli* line became an international hit and it led to other lines and other designs and more riches and glamour and fame. She had taken up residency in New York, in a huge apartment decorated by the most tasteful people who gratefully took direction from her. She was successful and with it she became... sophisticated. It was not a false sophistication, either; it came from a place that must have been hidden, the place that had been hinted at as she entered Gino’s years before. It was natural and she carried it with ease.

In the mail one crisp fall morning, she received an unusual gift: a man’s shoe, a single brown wing-tip formal shoe. There was no note or explanation: just a shoe. Bewildered, she put it away in the closet and thought no more about it. Having just returned from a hectic business trip, all she wanted to do was relax. She was reading later that day when the doorbell rang. Since no one

had been buzzed through security, she was concerned and rose cautiously to peek through the peephole. Before her, just on the other side of the door was Prince Robert. She couldn't believe her eyes.

“Cindy?”

She opened the door. “Rob?” He looked beautiful, tanned and fit. There was a certain glow and ease that she hadn't seen four years before. His smile was easy and honest.

“I understand you might have a strange man's shoe here. I would like to see if it fits me.”

THE END