

# Fairy Tale

TODD STRASSER

Cynthia Durella's stepmother, Ruth, was a witch. She may have lived in a large and fancy apartment on Park Avenue, but it didn't help her disposition one bit. She still had a lot of unresolved anger toward her first husband and it manifested itself in two ways: compulsive shopping and meanness toward her stepdaughter.

"Cynthia darling," Ruth would say after dinner, thoughtfully lifting a bright red fingernail to her bright red lips. "Would you be a dear and do the dishes and take out the garbage and straighten up the kitchen?"

Ruth seemed to believe that as long as she called Cynthia "darling" and "dear" she could make her do all the housework she wanted.

Cynthia always complied. This stepfamily deal was new to her and she didn't want to make trouble, especially since her father was in Europe and the Far East most of the time doing something with petrodollars.<sup>1</sup>

But after weeks of doing the dishes and cleaning the kitchen every night, Cynthia finally asked, "Why can't Sheri do it once in a while?"

Sheri was Ruth's daughter, the same age as Cynthia. But that's where the similarity ended. While Cynthia was slim and had an Ivory Soap complexion, Sheri weighed 156 pounds and had monster zits.

Ruth's mascaraed eyes narrowed into slits. "Sheri has a condition."  
"Yeah, dish soap gives me hives," Sheri whined—her normal tone of voice.

Cynthia had never heard of a condition that prevented someone from doing the dishes, but she wasn't surprised. Sheri was a raving hypochondriac<sup>2</sup> and Ruth pampered her to the extreme.

<sup>1</sup> petrodollars: money made in the oil industry

<sup>2</sup> hypochondriac: a person who often imagines sickness

In the kitchen Cynthia pulled on yellow Playtex gloves. It wasn't so bad, really. Ruth ordered out every night, so there were no pots, just glasses and plates to be rinsed and put in the dishwasher. And leftovers to be saved in the refrigerator for Sheri's multiple late-night snacks. Cynthia's own mother, who'd died in a car accident five years earlier, used to order out a lot too. But that was because she worked full time. Ruth didn't work. She just shopped.

Cynthia was sweeping the kitchen floor when Sheri came in for her first snack. It wasn't even half an hour since dinner, and at dinner she'd inhaled two egg rolls, an order of steamed dumplings, an order of sweet-and-sour pork, a whole big bag of Chinese noodles and a Dove Bar for dessert. Sheri opened the refrigerator and rooted around for a while before coming up with half a family-sized bag of peanut M & M's.

"The fall cotillion is in two weeks," she said, popping five M & M's into her mouth at once.

"What's that?" Cynthia asked.

"It's this dance they hold at school every fall. Everyone gets dressed up. This year it's masquerade."

"Sounds good," Cynthia said.

"Too bad you can't go," Sheri said as she munched on another handful of M & M's. Zit fertilizer.

"Huh? Why not?"

"Well, Mom and your father are going away for the weekend and someone has to walk Honey Plum at exactly eleven o'clock or you know what happens."

Honey Plum was Ruth's neurotic poodle who had to be walked four times a day like clockwork or he'd head for the most expensive Persian rug in the house and do it there out of spite. Cynthia assumed it had something to do with being male and named Honey Plum.

"How come *I* have to walk him?" Cynthia asked.

"Because I can't," Sheri said, downing another handful of candy. "He pulls so hard on the leash that I could dislocate my shoulder. I'm prone to that, you know."

Cynthia rolled her eyes. "I could go and just leave early, couldn't I?"

"Oh, sure," Sheri said. "Except no one shows up till ten and the school doesn't let dances go past twelve thirty. So if you left to walk Honey Plum you'd miss the best part."

Nothing seemed to delight Sheri more than giving bad news. She would have made a great weather forecaster.

"Can't we find someone else to walk Honey Plum?" Cynthia asked.  
 "No way," Sheri said. "You know he only lets members of the family walk him."

How could Cynthia forget? She'd walked Honey Plum at least twice a day since she'd moved in.

"Besides," Sheri said snidely, "what would you wear? You've got to go in something really fabulous, not the rags you've got in your closet."

"You went through my closet?" Cynthia was shocked.

"Oh, please." Sheri sighed. "Enough with the Little Miss Innocence routine, okay?" She took the bag of M & M's and went into her air-conditioned bedroom to watch television and grow fatter. Cynthia finished sweeping the floor, but she was in no rush to go to her room, which was tiny and right next to the kitchen and had no air conditioning or TV. Ruth, in fact, called it "the maid's room."

Instead she went out to the living room and sat on the white flower-print couch next to the window. Under the couch Honey Plum growled. Except for when nature called, he rarely came out. Cynthia couldn't blame him. Twelve stories below, cars raced up and down Park Avenue, their lights beginning to glow in the darkening evening. Cynthia picked up a fluffy couch pillow and hugged it. She missed the little suburban town she'd grown up in. People were nicer there, softer and more cognizant of each other's feelings. And they didn't go through your closets.

▲ ▲ ▲

Cynthia found it difficult to make new friends at the exclusive Roper School. Everyone had their cliques, and all they talked about were their summer vacations in Europe, their preschool shopping sprees at Bergdorf's,<sup>3</sup> and their weekends dancing all night at L'Image and Tunnel.<sup>4</sup> Even Sheri was in a clique of overweight girls who went around saying cleverly snide things about people and pretending they were Dorothy Parker.<sup>5</sup>

One day Cynthia was eating lunch alone in the dining room (at Roper the word *cafeteria* was frowned on) when she heard a voice behind her say, "You've got to be strong, hon. They're like sharks here. At the first sign of weakness they'll eat you alive."

<sup>3</sup> **Bergdorf's**: a high quality department store

<sup>4</sup> **L'Image and Tunnel**: nightclubs

<sup>5</sup> **Dorothy Parker**: American writer of the 30s and 40s, known for her sarcastic humor

Startled, Cynthia turned around and found a tall boy standing behind her. His skin was as pale as Greta Garbo's,<sup>6</sup> his long scraggly reddish hair obscured most of his face, and he wore several earrings and black eyeliner. His clothes were baggy and all black.

"Were you talking to me?" Cynthia asked.

"Who else, hon?" he said, placing his tray next to hers. "Do you mind the French style of dining? I think it's much more civilized than staring at each other with food dripping off our chins."

Cynthia shook her head in amazement as the boy placed his tray next to hers and sat down with a great flourish of arms and legs. His tray contained a single cup of lemon yogurt.

"I was born Stephen Alexander Morganson, but you can call me Sam," he said. "And don't bother telling me your story, hon. It's always the same. You're the victim of divorce and remarriage, cast into these opulent premises by absentee parents who can't remember why they had children in the first place."

Cynthia giggled. "And what's your story?"

Sam smiled and something sparkled in his front tooth. "I am the illegitimate son of Calvin Klein."

Cynthia soon learned that straight answers were not something Sam specialized in. Just who his parents were and how he came to the Roper School remained a mystery, but he was friendly and clever and never failed to make her laugh. Within a week they'd become good friends.

"The key to a successful year at Roper is the cotillion," Sam said one day after school as they window-shopped along Madison Avenue. "The current cliques are all holdovers from last year. Everyone's waiting for the cotillion to see who this year's stars will be."

"Stars?" Cynthia said, skeptically.

"Oh, absolutely, hon. The cotillion sets the tone for the whole year. I mean, if you come back from a Caribbean Christmas vacation with a truly spectacular tan, or a story about meeting someone from the royal family, you might move up a few notches, but otherwise the cotillion etches your fate in stone."

"How?"

"It's all in who asks you to dance, hon."

They stopped outside Ungaro's, the French fashion store. The mannequins were draped in fabulous off-the-shoulder black evening dresses.

<sup>6</sup> **Greta Garbo:** a beautiful movie star of the 30s who had a fair complexion

Cynthia pictured herself wearing one to the cotillion, but it was a silly fantasy. She couldn't afford a dress like that and she had to walk Honey Plum anyway.

"Something wrong, hon?" Sam asked.

"It's so depressing," Cynthia said with a shrug. "Everything in New York is so competitive. It's like distilled down to the rawest animal instincts. But instead of survival of the fittest, it's survival of the richest and most beautiful."

"So what else is new?" Sam smirked.

"Suppose I don't want to compete?" Cynthia asked. "Suppose I don't even want to go to the cotillion because I think it's silly and superficial? Does that automatically mean I'll be an outcast?"

Sam smiled. "No, hon. It only means you're chicken."

▲ ▲ ▲

Sheri stayed out of school for two days while she and Ruth shopped around town for the perfect cotillion costume gown. At Roper, Cynthia wandered glumly through her classes, trying to convince herself that it didn't matter.

One afternoon she sat with Sam in the library while he critiqued each person who entered through the sculpted wooden doors.

"Now, that's what you call a unibrow," Sam whispered about a girl whose dark eyebrows joined above the bridge of her nose. "Retro-caveperson chic."

Cynthia smiled weakly.

"Why the mope, hon?" Sam asked.

"Oh, I don't know," she replied. "I guess I hate myself for being afraid to go to the dance, but at the same time I hate myself for even caring about it in the first place."

"Ah." Sam raised a finger. "The classic approach-avoidance conflict."

"What should I do?" Cynthia asked.

Before Sam could answer, the doors to the library swung open again and a tall young man came in. He had broad shoulders and dark hair and blue eyes. Everyone in the library seemed to stop what they were doing to stare at him, Cynthia included.

"Conner Worthington Harkness the Third," Sam whispered. "Captain of the lacrosse team. Heir to the Harkness water bed fortune. Around school they call him The One."

"The One?"

"The one every girl wants."

"He must have a girlfriend," Cynthia said.

"He was seeing Rebecca Beaumaster last year, but she went to Greece over the summer and hasn't come back."

"Will he be at the cotillion?"

Sam's eyebrow went up. "Do I sense that approach is suddenly outweighing avoidance?"

▲ ▲ ▲

That night Sheri tried on her costume, which she and Ruth had picked up at Bendel's for a small fortune, along with shoes and a mask. The dress was made of fluffy pink and yellow feathers with longer plumes around the shoulders. The shoes and mask were red. The total effect, Cynthia thought, made Sheri look like a large pink-and-yellow chicken.

"Fabulous!" Ruth gasped.

"Scrumptious," added Cynthia as she swept the kitchen floor.

Sheri beamed. In a rare moment of magnanimity<sup>7</sup> she said to Cynthia, "I hope you don't feel bad about not going. It's just a silly dance."

"Oh, I know it is," Cynthia said, putting the broom in the closet and heading for the front door.

"Where are you going?" Ruth asked sharply.

"Uh, over to a friend's house to help him with his geography," Cynthia said.

"Well, just make sure you're home in time to walk Honey Plum," Ruth said.

Moments later Cynthia hurried through the night toward the address on Lexington Avenue Sam had given her. Most of the shops were closed and as Cynthia walked she imagined muggers lurching out of the dark shadows on the sidewalk. She was frightened by every move and sudden sound. Finally she came to a darkened storefront protected by a heavy iron gate. The sign above the gate said LEXINGTON THRIFT SHOP. In the window Cynthia could make out an old dresser, a black hat with a veil, and some dusty plates.

She heard the rapping of leather shoes against the pavement and spun around. A dark figure covered with a cape came toward her. Cynthia cowered.

"Lovely night, don't you think?" Sam pulled the hood off the cape.

7 magnanimity: generosity

Cynthia sighed with relief as Sam took out a set of keys and began undoing the locks on the iron gate. It squeaked and clattered as he pulled it up just high enough to duck underneath. Cynthia hesitated.

"Don't worry," Sam said. "My mother does volunteer work here three days a week. Just remember, whatever we borrow we must return."

Cynthia ducked under the gate and stepped into the darkened shop. It smelled musty like an old attic and was filled with furniture, kitchenware, and clothing.

"This way," Sam whispered, leading her through the dark. Cynthia almost tripped over a footstool. "*Careful!*"

She followed him down the stairs into the basement. Sam flicked on a light and Cynthia found herself in a room filled with oil paintings in gilt<sup>8</sup> frames, antique tables and chairs, and marble sculptures. Along one wall stood a rack of garment bags. Sam pulled one open and Cynthia gasped. Inside were beautiful old evening dresses.

Sam opened more bags. Inside were the most beautiful dresses Cynthia had ever seen. Some were made of satin, taffeta, and lace. Others had thick crinolines.<sup>9</sup> The dresses were old, but most were in almost perfect condition. "What are they doing here?" she asked.

"Donated years ago for tax write-offs," Sam said. "But the people who shop here have no use for stuff like this, so it sits around forever."

"Amazing." Cynthia gasped.

"No, rather sad actually," said Sam.

▲ ▲ ▲

On the afternoon of the cotillion Sheri left school early complaining of hot flashes. She spent the entire afternoon and evening primping in front of the mirror. Then, just before it was time to go, she decided her new red shoes were all wrong. For the next half hour she hopped around the apartment in her chicken outfit trying to find another pair with the right look and fit.

"Oh, it's hopeless!" she wailed. "The ones that look right don't fit and the ones that fit don't look right."

"Bergdorf's is open late," Ruth shouted. "If we hurry, we can make it!" As mother and daughter rushed for the door, Ruth turned to Cynthia and said, "There's a frozen chicken pot pie in the refrigerator for dinner,

8 **gilt**: finished in gold

9 **crinolines**: full, stiff underskirts

darling. And don't forget to be a dear and clean the kitchen and walk Honey Plum."

As soon as the door closed Cynthia ran to the phone and called Sam's house. "They left."

"I'll be right over," Sam said.

▲ ▲ ▲

Sam arrived carrying a Val-Pak with Cynthia's dress inside. He was wearing a black tux with a white wing collar shirt. Instead of a bow tie he had on a western string tie, and he'd pulled his hair back into a ponytail. Cynthia blinked. With all the hair out of his face he was a good-looking guy.

"What is it?" Sam asked.

"Oh, nothing," Cynthia said, averting her gaze.

Sam took the dress out of the bag. It was strapless, made of shimmering red silk, with a long pleated skirt. Cynthia tried it on in the bathroom. She put her hair up, and applied Ruth's expensive makeup. Staring at herself in the mirror, she thought she looked good. Not spectacular, but certainly presentable.

Sam knocked on the bathroom door. "Come on, let's see."

Cynthia opened the door. Sam's eyes went wide and he clasped his hands. "You look wonderful, divine! God, what a beautiful neck you have!"

"I look okay," Cynthia corrected him.

"But wait," Sam said, reaching into the Val-Pak. "We're not through." He took out a black satin pouch and pulled something glittering out of it. Cynthia gasped. It was the most beautiful diamond-and-ruby necklace she'd ever seen.

"Where did you get it?" she asked, awestruck.

"It was lying around my mom's dresser," Sam said, reaching into the pouch again. "Here's the matching bracelet and earrings."

Cynthia held up the necklace and watched it shimmer in the bathroom light. The only place she'd ever seen jewelry like this was in magazines. "Is it real?"

"Be serious," Sam said. "Mom keeps her real jewels in a vault. These are just the best fakes money can buy."

It didn't matter. Cynthia put them on and gazed at herself in the mirror. Even she had to admit she looked grand.

"And don't forget this," Sam said, pulling a red, bejeweled mask out of the pouch.



Cynthia took the mask and held it up to her face. She looked like someone in a movie.

Sam glanced at his watch. "Now let's go!"

Cynthia pulled the mask from her face. "Wait. What about shoes?"

"Don't you have shoes?" Sam asked.

"No. I thought you were bringing them."

"Oh, God." Sam groaned.

They searched through Cynthia's closet, but all she had were sneakers and flats. Next they tried Ruth's closet, but her heels were too long. Finally they looked in Sheri's closet.

"What about these?" Sam asked, holding up the new red shoes. "The color's perfect."

Cynthia tried them on. "They're three sizes too big."

"Don't worry," Sam said. "We'll stuff the toes with newspaper."

A few moments later they were walking quickly toward Roper. Cynthia wore sneakers and carried the red shoes in a D'Agostino<sup>10</sup> shopping bag.

"I can't believe how nervous I am," she said.

"It's natural," Sam said.

"But I don't even like dances," she said.

"No one does."

"Then let's not go." Cynthia started to turn but Sam grabbed her arm.

"If we don't go," he said, deadly serious, "then the jerks who do will think they're better than us."

"So?"

"So tonight you show them," Sam said. "Then tomorrow you can tell them where to go."

She knew he was right. Half of her cared, and half of her didn't. But she was already dressed.

The Roper gymnasium was decorated with blue and pink balloons and streamers. A mirrored ball hanging from the ceiling sent stars sweeping across the costumed dancers as a loud band played. In the girls' room outside the gym Cynthia stuffed the toes of Sheri's shoes with tissue paper. Then she and Sam put on their masks and joined the crowd.

▲ ▲ ▲

That evening Cynthia danced with pirates, princes, policemen, and penguins. Her picture was taken for the school newspaper and yearbook. At

<sup>10</sup> D'Agostino: a chain of grocery stores

one point she saw Sheri huddled with her friends, glancing at her and whispering. Behind her mask, her identity still unknown, she had become the object of jealousy. At Roper there was no higher form of flattery.

During a break at the punch table she giggled with Sam.

"You're the hit of the cotillion," he whispered. "Everyone's dying to find out who you are."

"They'll be disappointed," Cynthia whispered back.

Sam smiled and squeezed her hand. "I don't think so." They moved closer. . . .

Just then the band began to play again. Cynthia felt a finger tap on the shoulder. She turned and found a tall broad-shouldered boy in a Lone Ranger costume. Gazing into the steel-blue contact lenses behind the mask, she realized he was The One.

"Wanna dance?" he asked.

"Love to," she said.

The One danced divinely, sweeping her across the floor, twirling and spinning her gracefully. She loved the feeling of his arms around her, and the way the other dancers made room for them wherever their feet led.

"So can I see who's behind that mask?" The One asked between dances.

"That depends," she replied.

"Oh, I get it," The One said.

The band started playing a slow song and The One gathered her into his arms. "I'm getting a red BMW convertible for my eighteenth birthday," he told her.

"Wonderful," Cynthia said. "I've never ridden in one."

"My family has a house in Virgin Gorda,"<sup>11</sup> he said.

"I hear it's beautiful there," said Cynthia.

"My grandfather just donated a laboratory to Brown,"<sup>12</sup> The One said. "I've only got a C average, but I'm a shoo-in."

"Great school," said Cynthia.

The song ended. "Is it time to see who you are?" The One asked.

Time, Cynthia thought. Suddenly she looked at her watch. It was ten forty-eight. In twelve minutes Honey Plum was going to drench the Persian rug! Cynthia dashed out of the dance. Behind her she heard The One shout for her to wait, but there was no time to explain. As she ran,

<sup>11</sup> **Virgin Gorda:** one of the Virgin Islands in the West Indies

<sup>12</sup> **Brown:** Brown University is an exclusive university in Providence, Rhode Island.

one of her shoes flew off, but she didn't stop to retrieve it. In the girls' room she threw on her sneakers. A moment later she was sprinting toward Park Avenue.

The grandfather clock was tolling eleven as she let herself into the apartment. In the living room Honey Plum was lifting his leg. Cynthia grabbed the leash and managed to drag him outside just in time.

▲ ▲ ▲

On Monday the school was abuzz about the mystery girl in the red gown. Who was she? Where had she come from? Where had she gone? At lunch Sam slid his tray next to hers. "You won't believe this," he whispered, "but The One is going around school with your shoe asking every girl to try it on. He swears he's madly in love and has to find the owner."

No sooner had he said it than The One appeared in front of them with the red shoe. He gazed deeply into her eyes and she felt goose bumps rise on her arms. A crowd formed around the table.

"Were you at the dance?" The One asked.



"Yes," Cynthia said.

"Did you wear a red gown?"

"Yes."

"And jewelry?"

"Yes."

The One looked down at her feet and then back into her eyes. "Would you try this shoe on?"

"Yes." Cynthia slipped off her sneaker and The One slid the shoe on.

"It fits!" he cried. The crowd around them gasped.

As Conner Worthington Harkness the Third reached up for her hand, Cynthia glanced at Sam. For a split second he looked heartbroken. Then he managed a brave smile. Even in his pain he was happy for her. Cynthia looked back down at The One, who was now on his knees.

"I can't believe I found you," he said. "I want you to ride in my BMW. I want you to fly with me to Virgin Gorda. I'll ask my grandfather to donate another lab to Brown so you can go there too."

Sam started to get up. Cynthia watched him slide his tray away from hers. He had been her friend when no one else was interested. He had given her the gown and the jewels. More than that, he'd given her the courage to go to the dance.

"Wait," Cynthia said, sliding the shoe off and pulling out the tissue paper. "Someone stuffed paper in the toe. See? It really doesn't fit me at all."

The One took the shoe back. "Then who . . . ?"

"Come to think of it," Cynthia said, "it looks just like my stepsister Sheri's shoe. Why don't you try her?"

Scowling, The One stood up and went off in search of Sheri. The crowd followed him, leaving Cynthia and Sam alone.

Sam looked stunned. "But he's The One."

Cynthia smiled and put her arm around his shoulder. "Not for me he isn't." ∞