



CINDY'S STORY

Phil Parker

She called me Prince Charming.

That was the moment I knew what fate had in store for her.

She sat in a shop doorway, huddled under a filthy duvet, staring across at me with a look of utter adoration. I should have been impressed by the romantic allusion. It sounded nice enough but I knew differently. She might have seen my face looking into hers but the image that reached her mind would have been very different. Roughly thirty minutes later she was bundled into an ambulance. They wouldn't let me go with her, I wasn't family.

I never saw her again. Not alive, anyway.

But let me tell you the story properly. It's Jane, isn't it? You need to understand how easy it all was. How we fell prey to our fairy godmother. Let me begin at the beginning, like all good fairy tales.

I met Cindy at a hostel. It was a January night, cold enough to freeze your blood.



Some do-gooding Samaritan found me camped inside a cardboard box in an alleyway. As it turned out Cindy was only a short distance further along, neighbours in the darkness. The hostel had opened its doors for free, only a few would survive outside and they offered warmth

and a sleeping bag on the floor. The place was awash with the filthy, the lost and the crazies. It smelled enough to make your eyes water, while the noise of the mad ones screaming their paranoid delusions kept everyone awake but at least it was warm. It offered another day of life.

After almost a year and a half of this lifestyle I'd started to wonder if being frozen into a human lump of ice was a better alternative but so far, I'd resisted that temptation. Cindy and I had been brought into the hostel together but we hadn't spoken. You didn't engage with other travellers, that was the rule. Isolation meant safety. Friendships easily fell into dark pits of enmity and distrust. I should have obeyed the rule when a man, more hair than flesh, turned on her. He was out of his head on something or other, all it took was for me to stand in front of him with as much aggression as you can muster on an empty

stomach. He backed down and sidled off. She thanked me. Told me her name was Cindy. I told her mine was Eddie.

Next morning we left, keeping our distance, not saying anything, staying aloof. She was new to the business. You could tell. Her clothes were fairly clean, her skin had a normal colour. She'd find something or someone to rescue her. I felt sorry for her. She was pretty. But I would never be able to help her. I couldn't help myself.

There were rumours of a church hall handing out food and shelter on the other side of the river so I went to check it out. I didn't see Cindy again for a few weeks after that. People come and go. Ships that pass in the night. That was us. All of us.

She sat on a bench in a park, staring up at pink cherry blossom as though it was the greatest wonder of the modern world. I knew that expression. I'd seen it a thousand times on the addicts who swapped the hell of this world for one of their own invention. I don't know why I did it.

I spoke to her. Asked if she was all right.

That was my mistake, to care. I should have kept going, ignored her, left her to the delusions in her head. I'd have been better off. But I felt sorry for. She was still pretty but an anaemic version of what she had been. Yet it was enough for me to stop.

She smiled a lot. That was the thing that struck me most. She looked happy. Her eyes shone, big bright emeralds filled with light and mischief. I found myself smiling back at her, as though the condition was contagious. It turned out to be just that, though not in the way you – or I – anticipated. Far from it.

I stayed with her. She was good at begging. Those eyes, that smile, it was enough for men to take pity on her too. By the end of that day she'd earned enough to buy us a MacDonalds, on the promise we ordered at the external outlet where the cars lined up. It was like eating paradise.

I admit it. She was an asset. We pooled our daily gains. For a time.



Every once in a while, she'd vanish. No warning. She'd leave without a word. Days later she'd be back, wave at me like we were good friends and smile that smile that won me over immediately. She'd be clean again, have a new item of clothing. And she'd have money. It was no surprise what she was doing to earn it, she was young and pretty. She



wasn't alone doing that sort of thing, it was common practice. Yet it angered me. I knew why but I couldn't accept those reasons so I buried them and waved back at her and smiled.

Things stayed like that until mid-summer. The point in the calendar when I realised I'd been living on the streets for exactly two years. I spiralled downwards for that reason. I'd had enough. The year was going to roll inexorably towards the winter once again and I couldn't stand that hardship. There had to be something better except it eluded me like trying to catch my shadow.

Cindy had performed her usual vanishing trick at this point, leaving me to wallow in my self-pity. When she returned, she was different. No new clothes this time, cleaner but the sparkle in those green eyes had faded. We sat by the side of the river I remember, watching a father and son feed the ducks, he'd glance over at us nervously.

'You know what you need,' Cindy said after I'd confessed to the cause of my misery.

That was when she introduced me to the woman she called her Fairy Godmother. I never did find out her real name, if I had I might have been able to stop her wickedness. But this isn't a fairy tale where things turn out happily ever after.

The woman was a pimp. Cindy occasionally worked for her but refused the option of full-time occupation. It was a means to an end. Trouble was, the end never gathered enough definition to become clear in Cindy's addled brain.

She introduced me for one reason. I needed to escape my spiralling descent into suicide. I needed what Cindy's fairy godmother could provide: fairy dust.

I accepted it. Entirely on the assumption that it would kill me if I took enough.

Enough was a relative concept. Our fairy godmother didn't give it away, we had to earn it. I'd spent two years turning down such offers, I hadn't been bad looking once upon a time and I was still young. Qualities that had value.

The result led me to hating myself more and more. Fairy dust incapacitated you for periods of time while the brain went on hallucinatory journeys into landscapes that earned the drug its name. Perhaps it was the same stuff the Brothers Grimm had used, it certainly felt like it. Trouble was, the effect wore off faster each time and the vital quantity needed to end my life faded further and further down the yellow brick road of my dreams.

It was after a particularly brutal and bloody encounter with one of my customers, who'd decided to take his passions out on me in more ways than the traditional one, that I reached a decision. Fairy dust wasn't going to end my life. My latest customer had tried hard to oblige and failed. I had to take matters into my own hands.

I spent the day with Cindy who was only vaguely aware of what was happening. She was living through a glamorous ride in a golden carriage to a party hosted by a handsome prince who would whisk her away to a palace filled with rainbows and unicorns. I'd tried to tell her of my intentions but my darkness couldn't penetrate her drug-induced fantasy. I said my goodbyes and got a vague and airy wave in reply.

I waited until twilight, climbed over the balustrade of a bridge and hurled my pathetic body into the river below.

I'd never considered myself lucky but I suppose, that evening, something out of fairy tale brushed against me and sprinkled me with a different kind of magic. A fishing boat found me and hauled me aboard, unconscious and close to death.

It's not important to describe what happened next. Doctors pumped out the river water and the drugs, filled me with food and medicines that cured a catalogue of conditions they found inside me. A community group took me in, as I had nowhere to go to recover,



and helped me regain what I'd lost. I work for them now. People like me have a better understanding of cases like yours, Jane.

The first chance I got, when I'd recovered, I went looking for Cindy.

She was going to come back with me, I'd get her cleaned up. Sorted out. We would create a new life that didn't features golden carriages and princes.

I was too late.

I found her, huddled in a duvet, in a doorway. Looking over at me with dark and hollow eye sockets where the emeralds had turned into cheap jade in a bloodshot setting. She didn't know who I was. She didn't know anything that was real. She tried to focus as she stared at me as I knelt and called her name.

'Prince Charming!' she wheezed.

That's why I'm telling you this story, Jane. I don't want anyone else to experience her kind of happy ever after. You've been lucky. I know it doesn't feel like it now. But you've got a second chance. Just like I had. You have to start again. Give life another go. Because there are no fairy godmothers who grant your wishes and make life perfect. That's a fantasy for children. When you're an adult, people who offer those promises are more like the wicked step-mothers.

Now you've reached this community group, let us help you. Remember Cindy's story. Create a new life for yourself. A brand new once upon a time.