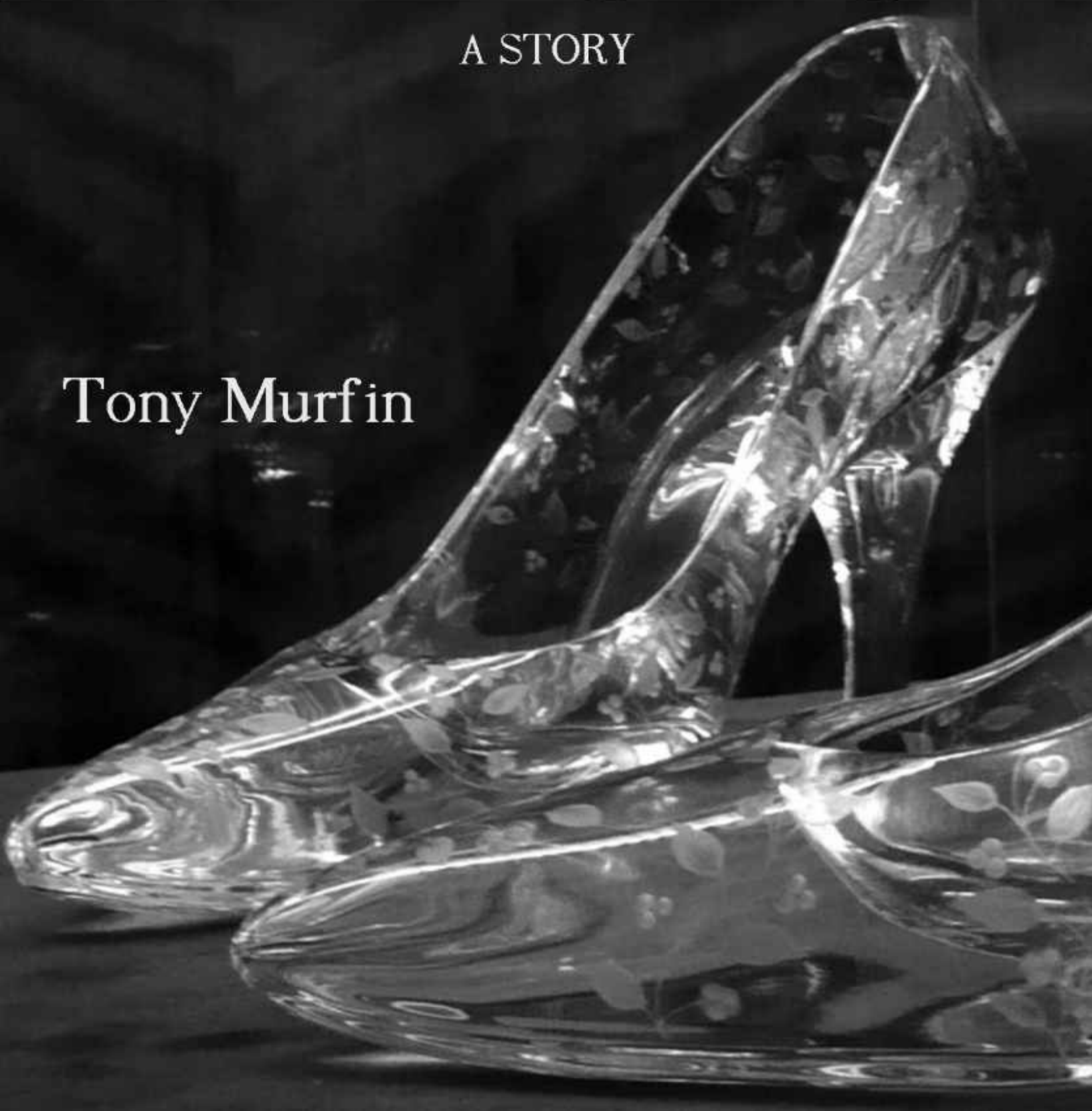


Cinderella's Wedding Night

A STORY

Tony Murfin



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by Tony Murfin

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A Fairy Tale for Grown-Ups

*Roo coo coo, roo coo coo
No blood in the shoe:
The shoe's not tight,
The real bride's here tonight.*

Cinderella, Brothers Grimm, trans. Tatar

Fourie plucked compulsively at the lining of his coat, lost in thoughts so private, so distant that for minutes he was unaware that the coach had stopped. This was his rendezvous—already his travelling companions had melted into the scrub so completely that Fourie began to doubt their silent, mistrustful existence. He stepped down into the deserted inn yard.

The Empire was officially, if briefly, at peace. Still, the wreck of armies—deserters, renegades, unmastered mercenaries—threatened the ruined roads. Any traveller on such a trek in these times had to have more to fear of the 'law' of the capital than from the anarchy of the country—had to be willing to risk all to reach some place to which the arm of the state did not extend.

At this time Fourie was threatened by nothing specific, only the unpredictable risk of denunciation and its consequences. All the same, this radical thinker, this scientist, journalist and pamphleteer, this champion of the people, Paul Fourie, found that no official press would publish his work. The *unofficial* presses—and their operators—were disappearing daily. So he had retired to the solitude of his apartment, working on his novel and admitting only the rare individuals who were at liberty, and yet could still be trusted.

Into this sequestration, the note came.

It must have arrived during the hours of curfew. It was there when Fourie rose with first light—a note that required him to attend a prescribed inn at a certain time on the day of arrival of a designated mail coach. This note, imperious and simple, could not be ignored. His summoner had a story to tell, and wished someone to tell it for her. Someone trusted by the people. A story of a time between her adoration by the public—and her vilification by the mob. Between the romance that united the Empire—and the estrangement that tore it apart.

A siren call on scented notepaper, the paper was signed simply with the name the public still knew her by then—she had other names before, others after—

Cinderella.

#

Time passed—an hour, more. Fourie paced a thin strip of earth that was all the shade afforded by the locked inn. Finally, the approach of slow hoofbeats drew his attention. A horseman, tall, leading a mount and pack mule. Uniform and harness, plainly military, was stripped of insignia, every ribbon and regimental button excised. This train would have been unremarkable if Fourie had not recognized the brand on the animals. A brand which had been circulated on official handbills and on posters, threatening damnation and offering a reward: the brand of the Fifteenth Hussars. The Empress' loyal bodyguard, the regiment that left the field at the Battle of Tacloban, exposing the flank to the enemy and the Empire to disaster.

Whatever he was, this servant or mercenary or bodyguard was little more talkative than the occupants of the mail coach. He indicated Fourie to mount the spare horse by gesture alone, and condemned his awkwardness on the animal with nothing more than a passive stare as he fastened the writer's pack to the mule. Soon they were moving, the open air and even rhythm of the horse refreshing after the jarring coach.

They travelled for perhaps two hours, sun and silence equally oppressive. Then, in the shade of a massive outcrop of rock set between the procession and the sea, they stopped. An inclination of the head told Fourie to dismount by massive iron-bound gates set directly into the stone. Gates which resounded shut as soon as he was led inside, the sound echoing up the carved tunnels and stairways through which his silent escort led him. When at last they stepped outside it took several moments to readjust to the light of the broad southern sky.



He found himself on a platform of flagstones, 200 yards wide, sheltered from the sea by a wall yards thick. This, he realized, must be the great Battery of Omroc, built to command the passage between two oceans. Here great guns had lain in silence waiting to smash navies.

The guns, their carriages and ammunition were gone now. Instead, a low *chaise* was set, barely brushed by the shade of an awning. On it reclined a figure. Fourie did not allow his gaze to be drawn to her at first, instead taking in the shaded table set with plates of delicacies, an open bottle. Everything glistened unfeasibly, hazed and beaded with moisture: all was set on trays of ice. In the South. In July! He felt amazement, dripping as he was with sweat, still in northern travelling clothes, road-grimed and tightly laced from his collar to his heavy boots.

His hostess did not address him. Fourie stared at the table until the slightest movement drew his eye. Perhaps it was natural that one of those famous feet should first catch his attention; one foot drawn slowly up until it rested lightly by the opposing thigh. A foot, an ankle, a calf, delicate but dark, brown and bare as an urchin running through a wheat field. The princess from the cinders had been drawn to the heat of the south to lie beneath the sun, bare and free.

It was hard to connect her with the figure from her own myth. A figure he had seen painted in oils and modelled in marble. There still was something delicate about her, but also something else. Something more vital. More dangerous.

More *woman*.

All at once she was peasant and princess, tough and fragile, hard and insubstantial—a diamond in the ashes of her empire: the humble Josephine Savatier and the People's Empress—

Cinderella.

“Look at me.” The voice was low, accustomed to command. Clipped and otherworldly, but with a flatter, more natural tone concealed below. The effect was disconcerting.

Fourie looked at her face.

As with her limbs, the sun had coloured the exposed flesh from collar to brow. Her neck was long, her head small. The face had gained a few lines around the eyes, he was ashamed to note; a few threads of red showed on her cheekbones—but the eyes themselves were still bright in their burnished frame, bright and looking straight at him.

“You are late.” Fourie started to tumble out an account of the road, the uncertainties of travel—“Enough. You are here now. You will tell my story.

“If you are ready...”

He looked at his empty hands, uncertain—but two figures appeared carrying a folding campaign desk. They set out the tools of his trade—quills, pen-knife, imported inks, fine laid paper. All was set at a clap of those small hands, accepted at another. At a further handclap, the Fourie’s quill was dipped and poised. He was ready.

“And so, to begin. My wedding night.”

Below are her words, set down that day in the summer sun. So far as Paul Fourie could keep pace with the telling, this is an honest and accurate account of Cinderella’s wedding night.



“My new husband the Prince proved himself quite the performer. He really seemed to enjoy himself, playing to an audience; three official witnesses seated behind the *par-le-vent*. Performance and encore, and if there was no applause, the doctor—that same oily doctor who made so much of that hideous examination before the wedding—was obviously moved by proceedings. The two retainers beside him, a hundred or more years’ royal service between them, took more of an... *academic* interest.

“I believe I played my part well. I expressed the requisite confusion and pain, bled when the script required it, and as the night wore on I continued to demonstrate the acquiescence and resignation necessary in a royal vessel, mother of a planned dynasty.”

Cinderella looked upwards with eyes the same clear cornflower blue as the sky.

“That resignation is easier when you have a gilded ceiling to look at.

“The witness accounts will be in the royal archive somewhere, a permanent record of the legal niceties—virginity, legitimacy, consummation. All that was missing was the Royal artist. We could have sold engravings—at least the treasury would have stopped complaining about the cost of a Royal wedding.

“I think you will remember the official wedding brochure—you wrote that scurrilous pamphlet, your so-called satire. The official lie sold better though, the presses turning night and day. Wonderful, I hardly recognised myself—let alone the rest of my family. Do you know how many hours were spent researching—and by researching I mean manipulating—my family tree? And then it turned out my father really did have royal ancestry, six generations back. A surprise to just about everybody except himself. Just a pity they had to tell him.

“Mother had less luck. Unacceptable on several counts, she had to be demoted. Eventually even *I* had to call her step-mother. Sad, after all she did to protect me.

“So my real mother—of course by real I mean invented—became that haughty Nordic princess of ancient lineage. Credible, but obscure enough to deter casual prying. As we both know, serious prying could end badly under a regime such as ours.

“And yes, I did say ‘protect me’. She’s my mother—what did you expect? You’ve been listening to too many rumours, reading too many official statements. Don’t tell me you believe all those fairy-tales about pumpkins and mice and God only knows what else! Really, that’s so funny. The Chancellor always believed in a Big Lie—a story so ridiculous that no one would ever have the impudence to invent it.

“But you are leading me astray. And trying to write in this heat. And you are dry!”

Fourie was moved into the shade of the awning, closer to the Princess. A glass materialized for him and was filled. The Princess’ glass was refreshed.

“You must pay attention. My story will be told, and you are the man to tell it.” She placed the tip of one finger above Fourie’s knee. He did not stir.

“Where was I? The witnesses, yes? There was a point—proceedings seemed concluded, at least to the satisfaction of the Prince. Things just naturally—subsided. There were maids and baths and I was ushered out of the royal bedchamber and off to my own quarters. More comfortable, if less ornate. Much more private. I remember sliding between soft, soft sheets and slipping into a relieved sleep.

“Do you remember your dreams? But you are a writer. Usually I never do. But that night, such a dream!

“I was walking on a beach. It must have been night—I remember looking down at my feet on the sand, thinking how strange they looked in the moonlight. I was naked, the wind puckering my skin—but the sea, blood-warm, kept running up and rolling languid round my toes. I tried to look away, look out to sea but when I did it had changed, it wasn’t the ocean any more but a pond, enormous and studded to the horizon with lily pads. Instead of fresh sea air the atmosphere was musty, and instead of clean sand and sea water I felt my feet sinking into dank mud.

“Then something spoke to me, spoke from the mud around my feet. I knew I shouldn’t look down, that it would spoil everything, but somehow I could not help myself—

“What I thought I saw—thought I saw, just for a moment—was a huge fat frog, its bloated tongue such a peculiar shade of red, wrapping itself in and out of my toes. The frog spoke and the voice was familiar—‘Princess, wake up—

“ ‘Princess, Princess, wake up and put on your slippers, your glass slippers.’

“I shut my eyes tighter, but I now knew the Prince—MY Prince—was there, curled up at my feet. It was his slaverling tongue running in and around my toes.

“Sleepily I asked him what else I should put on. With an odd croaking laugh he said, ‘Nothing, my Princess. Just the slippers.’ I looked up and there they were on the dressing table—bad luck, as you know—on a little velvet cushion in front of the single candle. Polished and waiting.”



Here the Princess paused, called for wine and drank half a glass. Then she waited, perhaps watching Fourie's reaction to the details so far. Had she had finished her account? He started to put down his pen. Abruptly, she continued—

“Those slippers—a stroke of genius. That was what father expected for the money he paid out. The money mother persuaded him to pay. Disappearing acts, hidden carriages, mysterious foreign footmen, were all clever tricks. The slippers though, they were the masterstroke. Our consultant—let's call her my fairy godmother, that was so funny—had done her research well.

“Perhaps too well, because there I was in a draughty bedchamber at God knows what time of night wearing nothing but glass slippers with the Prince stretched out on the edge of the bed, staring at my feet in the candlelight. I was lucky I didn't catch pneumonia.

“Of course even genius needs a little luck to help it along, and if it hadn't been for my father—or rather, my mother, when she tried to protect me—”

She looked at Fourie, her eyes glacier cold. “Your expression—I could think that insolent. But that was the second time I mentioned my mother ‘protecting’ me. That doesn't fit into any of the stories you have been told, does it? But be patient. I could spare you the details of the rest of that night, if you prefer?”

“No? Don't worry, you'll get all the dirt you want. Just continue to imagine me there in my slippers, and you will find out what happened to those, too. All in its own time.

“The Prince's pleasure at seeing me in such a state was apparent. He summoned me back to the bed, and at first, to be fair to him, he did his best to show me his appreciation. Fumbling away he actually asked me if I'd been touched like that before. I was honest: I said no, I hadn't been touched quite that way. The problem was, although no-one of course expected that a Prince should be inexperienced, the girls he had encountered must have been so shallow that the merest clumsy touch of a prince was enough to bring them pleasure. Or they had not dared contradict his rather tenuous grasp of anatomy.

“You raised an eyebrow, when I said I had not been touched *quite that way*? Perhaps it is time to step a little further back into my story.

“I will tell you about my mother first, and you must remember to forget all that ‘step-mother’ nonsense. True, she was younger than my father, really just a girl when he

married her. But she did not remain young, especially after disloyally bearing him daughter after daughter after daughter.

“My two sturdy older sisters were broad, dark and hairy like my father—but I was the little image of my mother, certainly fit to pass for a Nordic princess.

“Our home was comfortable—not luxurious, but large, because my father considered it necessary to have a large household for the sake of appearances. We each had our own private bedchamber, mother, father, all three sisters. Mother and father did not share a bed much, if at all, after I was born. He should have been able to skulk around unchallenged, but I think my mother had some instinct, or she bribed a servant to keep watch on his night-time ramblings.

“And so, one winter’s night, the very first night he *rambled* into my chamber, to ‘wish his little princess goodnight,’ to run his fingers through her golden hair, to reach under her nightdress—well, suddenly mother was there. Not upset—just angry. As if she’d been ready with her anger for a long time. And if she screamed more at me, that is understandable. She had a marriage to maintain—she had nothing without her husband.

“And so my life changed. I was sent downstairs—mother’s only option was to put me out of harm’s way. True, I had to work—clean the hearths and ranges and the grand fireplaces; but I was safe, and warm. I learned to move about the house the way servants did, hidden from view in unadorned passageways and bare staircases, often just moving from fireplace to fireplace, no need to step into the family rooms at all.

“There I stayed through winter, through spring, into summer. Still I worked. When the grates were cool and empty, I blacked them and polished the brassware. While my sisters ran in the sun and turned their skins nut-brown I stayed inside, shaded and pale. While they gorged themselves, I worked and stayed thin. And when they debased themselves with coarse servant boys smuggled into unused rooms, I was sometimes there in the shadows. Watching. Learning.

“Autumn came and the fires were lit once more. Even when a fire dies the embers smoulder. To stop my feet burning I wrapped them in strips of linen and poured on cold water. The water shrank the cloth to my feet and it clung tight and kept them pale and small and soft.”

The Princess paused a moment, her eyes closed. She resumed softly—

“I am famous for my feet: age may have laid a hand on me, here and there—a gentle hand—but are my feet not still delicate, and soft?” She raised one foot towards

Fourie, looking him directly in the eye, while he kept his pen ready, unable to hold her gaze.

“But I distract you—and you must write.

“So, now you understand what I meant by my mother *protecting* me. My father never came near me, never touched me again.

“My sisters—do you have sisters? But you are a man. That is different.

“My sisters were not fooled for as long as I thought by my concealment in dark nooks while they dabbled with their swains. Perhaps they meant to taunt me with the freedoms they took with those boys. I only know what happened one evening with a boy they were fighting over. A groom’s lad, or some such.

“It was one of the guest bedrooms. Some small-town notable had just left after visiting my father. I had just come in to clean when my sisters burst in with the boy and I had to hide, crouching down in a dark corner of the fireplace, my ragged ash-coloured dress and the shadows hiding me.

“At least, I thought I was hidden. At first my sisters contented themselves with whispering shocking enticements—each trying to outdo the other, illustrating their points by guiding the boy-groom’s hand under their clothing until, disarrayed and obscenely flushed, they exchanged a look and almost squealed in unison—

“ ‘If sweet spring lamb can’t tempt you—’

“ ‘Maybe you’d prefer a skinny goat.’ Before I knew what they were talking about they had me cornered in the fireplace, had pulled me up and out and were holding me between them. Pulling at my elbows, they jabbered back and forth—

“ ‘Here it is—never been touched—’

“ ‘Never been washed—’

“ ‘Rangy kid makes a fine peasant dish—’

“Then they were hiking up my tattered dress, hands prying between my thighs and pudgy fingers rubbing me in places where I hadn’t been touched before and I found myself just helpless in front of this horse-smelling boy who had his *thing*—I hardly knew what it was—in his hand now and suddenly he was standing so close to me with his head back making a sound like one of his horses in pain and something suddenly splashed hot against my thigh—

“And then they just laughed and pushed me back in the ashes and ran off, straightening their clothes.

“Eventually I collected myself, rubbed the drying mess off my thigh with a handful of ashes, and went back to my duties. Strange, but for months I felt as if I could still see the stain left by that ash.

“Are you shocked? There is no need to be. I became a little less innocent, but no real harm was done. Later— after my engagement—I was able to take care of my sisters.

“I arranged for them to be married to the two most beautiful, most dashing lieutenants in the royal bodyguard. They were so loyal to me, those boys. Safely away from the front line, they could take an innocent pleasure in each other’s young bodies that my sisters could never share. But they kept their new wives close and made sure my sisters’ behaviour could not cause me any scandal or embarrassment.

“Which reminds me of my father.

“You see, families need discipline. With the new military connection, it was suggested that my father needed to maintain his authority. He was talked into the purchase of a captain's commission in the Hussars. Honestly, I thought he knew that there were additional arrangements to be made—a modest sum to waive the tour of duty on the Eastern front. Still, every month we hear of some missing officer released across the border, long after all hope was lost.

“But you are leading me off my subject. You are here to learn about my wedding night, not my family.

“There is not too much more to tell you. The Prince, you will remember, was attempting to give me some pleasure. He soon got bored with that. Thankfully.

“He drew a simple wooden chair up to the fire, gestured me to sit. He placed my feet, in my slippers, up on the velvet cushion, the soles towards him. He knelt there for a moment—almost tender, almost meek—then with each hand he gripped an ankle, parting my feet slightly—and for the first time I felt a little tremor of anticipation as he leant forward and—

“He started making love to my *shoes*.

“You know, certain materials barely diminish sensation. They may even enhance it. The touch of silk; the bite of leather; even certain—protective items.

“Glass is *not* one of those materials.

“I remember that the little cushion was soon knocked out of the way. My legs were working like a set of bellows, to no effect on me whatsoever, though the Prince’s flame seemed to burn hotter and hotter.

“There was more. I do not remember everything. I recall being face down on a rug, with my feet raised in the air for his attention. He even lay down and had me stand on him, pressing down with the glass heel where—well, even I could almost feel his pain. Through his clenched teeth, he thanked me.

“Finally I was thrown back on the bed, my Prince—my husband—between my thighs looming over me as a lover should. He bent one leg back and back, and I started to think, ‘At last!’ Then he eased the slipper off one foot. Clamping his mouth onto the bared toes, he slid the slipper down, right down onto the Royal Member. I could see it through the glass, engorged and distorted and disgusting. He wasn’t even holding the shoe, it was just propped there, twitching—until suddenly I saw it just—cloud over. Then it lowered, pulse by pulse, until it fell silently onto the bed between my thighs.

“He was not finished. Not quite.

“As I lay there trying not to think, he said softly, ‘Princess, do you remember?’ He lifted my foot one more time. I could not help myself—I propped myself up on my elbows to see what he was doing.

“With my foot in one hand, he held the defiled slipper in the other. Achingly slow, as I tried to hold back my bile, he slid the foul thing onto my foot. As clammy mess oozed between my toes, he called out—

“ ‘It fits!’

“And then he stretched out with his head by my feet, his own rather unpleasant feet next to my face, and fell asleep, snoring fitfully.

#

“Really, that is all. Not much as dirty secrets go. We all have them, do we not? Except Princes, who are of course infallible. And know it.

“I did not sleep well the rest of the night. I woke early—the sun slanting shallow through the curtains, my new husband flat on his back, mumbling nonsense in between his snorts. There, building up the fire, was the maid. She was kneeling in front of the grate to work on it, the soles of her feet bare and turned towards me. I remember thinking, *pretty little feet*.

“I swung myself off the bed. The maid started at the chink of glass on the oak floor. She stood and turned. So young, as young as I was. Before she remembered herself and lowered her gaze she looked at me with big brown eyes. Attractive, in a vulgar sort of way. For a moment I felt proud. A beautiful mistress deserves a beautiful maid and I

expected her to be in awe of my naked and regal form. Then I followed her gaze downward, and saw, as she did, my glass slippers. Foul and violated and disgusting.

“I sent her to fetch water, a good iron pot of water. I hissed at her to hurry. While she was gone, I built the fire up. I'm good with fires.

“She returned and as I set the pot over the coals I sent her away again. I watched until the water started to bump and steam.

“I had a destiny—to become the mother of a nation, my belly permanently fat and my ankles fatter. The slippers would not change or age, though. However abused, however stained, *they* would clean up like new.

“The water came to a rolling boil. I held one slipper by its slender heel. I dipped the toe into the water and heard a sound like a glass bell, struck once. I lowered it further—for an instant it was bright and beautiful again. Then white threads ran up it right to my hand and—like sand through my fingers—it fell away.

“The other I threw straight in. It shattered with a flat crack.

“The maid with the eyes and the little feet would have to go, of course. I would tell the Prince I had only asked her to clean my beautiful slippers, and see what the fool of a girl had done to them. Such a shame.”

#

In the long pause that followed, Fourie thought that all heat seemed to have gone from the low evening sun. Once more the Princess gestured for her glass to be filled, and in a long draft emptied it.

“That is all. You know the rest of the story, or you're clever enough to fill in the gaps. Tell it to the world, tell them and the Prince can whistle for his precious divorce, for his marriage of convenience, for his alliance, and for his peace.

“But I have talked too long, and you are tired. You must travel in the morning. Put down your pen and sit here. Closer, now.

“Drink with me.”

Author's Note

I love and hate fairy tales. Love the infinitely pliable literary heritage, shared across many cultures. Hate the infantilization of the tales, hate the Cinderella Syndrome. Love the retellings of, among others, Angela Carter, Sara Maitland and Marina Warner. My little story is 'post-feminist' only in that it follows such incredible predecessors.

Cinderella's Wedding Night has a certain French flavour. It arose from a collision of circumstances—being in Versailles with time on my hands, having been reading about the Marquise de Rambouillet, 'on her lit de parade (her show bed) in her alcove, waiting to be amused and provoked, to be told stories...' ¹ and I thought of Cinderella, waiting on her lit to tell her untold story.

Despite the French flavour, this story does not take place in a historical Europe. My Cinderella shares a 'real' name, true, with a 19th century courtesan who would later change her name to avoid associations with savate, an 'old used slipper'. ² The further symbolism of the slipper would also not be lost on my Prince. As for the site of the disastrous battle, 'Anne of Tacloban' is the protagonist of the Grimms' Aschenputtel.

1. Marina Warner.
2. Virginia Rounding.

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