

# ***Cinderella: Riding with Depression***

## ***An Interview with Beth Cook***



***Jennie Harbour***

### ***What I'm wondering to start out is, why did you choose to explore Cinderella?***

In some ways it was a difficult choice because it was a story I loved to hate. Hate is perhaps a strong word, but the notion of Disney and that frothy world that's created in Cinderella was a world that I felt locked out of. So I think choosing Cinderella was a way of exploring my exclusion from that world.

Also, the whole notion of shoes is pretty interesting. Partly because I'm tall and I have large feet. I never would have been able to fit into smaller shoes! I guess I'm interested in the concept of what you do to make a shoe fit so you can wear it. My mother, who has hundreds of shoes, once told me it didn't matter whether her shoes fit, she only had to wear them into the restaurant!

### ***Have shoes been painful for you?***

Well, they have, and we tend to think that we should have smaller feet than we do, even if they would make us topple over. We probably have feet that are the right size to give us the balance we need for the bodies we have, but that's not how we live. We always long for smaller feet.

I also had very flat feet as a child. In the 50s, my dad and uncle took my cousin and me to a foot doctor in London (Ontario). We had special supports in our shoes, and we had to walk on a kind of plank to put arches into our feet. It was boring and painful. (One day we crayoned pictures of nude males and females on the board. We never had to use it again!) Flat feet also necessitated wearing oxford shoes, so I used to dream of wearing fancy shoes. My parents would occasionally let me have a pair of black patent leather shoes that I was to wear just for Sunday school. I couldn't restrain myself, so, of course, I lost the privilege of wearing them.





I used to shine up a pair of slip-on rubbers and pretend to wear black patent leather shoes because at least they weren't oxfords. Every time we went to buy new shoes I'd be hoping for something other than oxfords, and it was always oxfords. In those days they were X-raying our feet. You could try on your new oxfords and go and stand in this X-ray machine and it showed you exactly how well the shoes fit. So we were busy frying our feet, and who knows what we

were doing to the rest of our bodies!

***Tell me more about your choice to explore Cinderella. You said you loved to hate it. What was going through your mind at that time?***

I thought, "I'm here but I don't think I like it." And I've lived a lot of my life like that. It's funny. I can recall times when my social life has revolved around the lavish people, but I'm very busy pushing them away or asserting myself in a kind of dark way. If one wonders why I haven't been financially successful and all that, well, it's all in the way I've behaved around affluent people. So there's a real mixed feeling about it. There's a love of some of the beautiful things, but there's also a deep mistrust and a need to be different—perhaps a need to be one of the have-nots, or certainly that's how I perceived myself.

I think of all the versions of the Cinderella story, I liked German one best. I like the notion of people chopping of their toes to make the shoe fit. I prefer the darker stories because they suit me better. That dark extreme runs through me.



***Do you remember what particular scene drew you into the story?***

It was probably Cinderella slaving away, wondering why her life wasn't otherwise. I wasn't quite happy with the boundaries around the traditional role of either fairy godmother or Cinderella. I kept wanting to turn the fairy godmother into a stepmother or a darker force.

I guess that's because I'm suspicious of goodness. Growing up in a black and white child's world, I didn't realize that you could be a mix of good and bad. You had to be perfectly good. Since I couldn't be perfectly good, I felt I was perfectly bad!

***Can you tell me more about this dark fairy godmother? How did you see her?***



She's a dark side of myself that runs off with me at times. I can read you the piece that I wrote about her if you'd like.

"As you know, fairy godmothers come in all shapes and sizes. Mine looks like me. She is so much like me that I would understand if you mistook her for me. To your naked eye, and sometimes to mine, she *is* me. Mine is a fairy godmother of darkness. She is a constant companion, perpetually glued to me. Like a shadow, she sometimes looms large. There are times when she is miniscule, but she is always there. She travels in tandem with me, and, when she can, she takes control. I like to think of the **Biblical** line "through a glass darkly." When my dark fairy godmother takes control, she sucks the joy out of

living. The air becomes heavy. We are distanced from places and people. She disconnects us from what we normally see and savor. The flavor is simply gone. Days are dull, pointless, purposeless. Warm, kind souls are replaced by those who judge and criticize. She sucks at strength, vitality, belief, and hope. **She drives out light.** She is my co-pilot, my Siamese twin, my sister. I hate her. I abhor her. Do I ever love her? Only when she has stolen the show and has complete control. I am in her clutches. She leads us through her dark world, past disapproving faces and cold grey buildings. Finally, serendipitously, something breaks her spell. There's a crack in her facade and I peer out to see light and life beckoning me to join. I want to, but I am afraid. By now it is more comfortable to ride it out in the dark.

My fairy godmother does indeed know the way to take us. But I do not like her destination. I want out. I want love and laughter, even if they are still tainted with her dark ways.

It is time once again for me to take the reins. I'll take her for a ride she will never forget. In time, she will have her turn to drive us again. This is the way it is. Whenever I think I have shut her out at last, she taps me on the shoulder with the icy finger of despair and says, "Move over," I do. Perhaps I always will. But then my turn comes again. And my dark fairy godmother-sister must play by my rules until the next time. It's a marriage of sorts.

Divorce is out of the question in the world we share. I am my own fairy godmother."

***Can you just say a little more about where that dark coach takes you?***

Into despair. Where the room is bleak and all the light is bled from it. That's what I find so strange about depression. It's as if the air is heavy, thick,

and impenetrable. By the same token, there is that hope of light, but I think the possibilities and the despair are all wrapped up in the self. Deliverance comes from oneself rather than from an outside force. I get more strength from living that way—I think there's much more possibility for life if I take that responsibility, rather than pinning it on an outside fairy godmother!

I had a fairly depressed life as a child. My mother would always, in great sympathy, say, "Well, I *know* things will get better, just around the corner, things will get better." For the longest time I waited to get around the corner, for things to change, but they didn't.

If I could do it differently, or if I could have had her do it differently, I would have wanted help turning things around for myself. Now, I do little bits of turning things around, and it makes a difference. Just keeping things moving makes a difference. Even when I'm being taken on a journey I don't like, I know that it will end. I will either get thrown off, or I'll jump off, or there'll be something, and I'll be able to come back to a better place, a place that I can tolerate more easily. I also know that I'll go on the dark journey again, having done it enough times.

***It seems that you're taking more and more power back.***

Yes. And I'm going on fewer and fewer of those journeys. I seem to be able to expect one every Christmas! But you know, I am hoping to reduce them to one trip a year.

***I'm really fascinated by this dark fairy godmother and the way you see her. Would you say that she's the one in the story that bears the wound? Who is wounded in the story the way you see it?***

Hhmn. Well, I guess they both are, really. I don't think you can be as dark as my fairy godmother and not be wounded. And certainly, the powerless Cinderella who is just good, blandly good, she is lacking dimension as well. There's not enough substance for me in someone who is just plain good. I want to turn her over and see behind. There's something missing there.

We have a bird at home. She lives in a cage and we're astounded at how happy she is. She's just a love bird, a little love bird. But she seems extraordinarily happy and she sings all the time. And my husband



says, if only she realized how small she really is and how utterly trapped she is—but she doesn't seem to know that!

***So you're saying that the very, very dark, and the very, very light are both wounded in the sense that they don't have that other dimension to them?***

Absolutely. As much as I've always rebelled against the black and the white, I've been solidly black myself. I have not allowed the light to trickle into the darkness. I have not allowed myself to be both. I can't help but go back to the constraints of the church that I was raised in, to the teachings of Sunday school. It was the United Church, which is fairly liberal, but in the child's literal way of hearing things, I was condemned every day.

***Can you elaborate? How did you see yourself as a child?***

Well, it's the bad little girl... and just this terrible sense of not having value, not having a purpose, not belonging, not being worthy, being excluded. And a great sense of perfectionism that made it very hard to redeem myself. Whatever I tried, I was just so sure that it would end in failure that generally, it did, because that was my expectation.

I was such a perfectionist that it could never be good enough for me, either. As much as I hated the forces outside myself that I thought made things so black and white, and made it so hard to achieve anything, I embodied all those forces from a very early time. I was as judgmental as anyone, very busy judging myself. And others, too.



***Cinderella doesn't seem to feel her possibilities. She just works hard. But does she get fed up at a certain point?***

Yes. Despair gets tedious. Especially for those around you. I mean, you can kind of get into it yourself, but it's very boring for other people.

***What keeps it going?***

Oh, well, I think a lot of determination. Really. Stubbornness, blocking out possibilities. Sometimes people who care about you can be trying to dance you out of the bleakness, and yet, I don't know, it just can't always be done for some reason. Sometimes people like me put the brakes on and hang onto it for longer than necessary. It becomes a way of life in itself.

***What is the attraction?***

That's a very good question. I've heard people say, "Oh, so and so chooses depression," and I think that nobody chooses it, really. It's more like you somehow get yourself in a tunnel and you keep choosing the wrong doors. It gets harder, and you get further and further from any good pathway. It's possible to come back, but the person who's depressed makes that very difficult sometimes.

And then other times, I find that all I have to do is see an interesting film, or something that pulls me out of myself just for a little while. It's enough to know that there's possibility, there's hope, there's redemption (I like that word)—that all those things are possible and they're not too far away. You just keep going in that direction, and you'll be okay.

***I wonder what brought Cinderella out of her despair. In the French version, a fairy godmother flies in and starts putting her to work to do all these basically positive things to get her to go to the ball, and in the German version, it's a bird, it's the natural world. What agent of transformation do you feel expresses your experience?***

I guess I would prefer the natural world to somebody coming in and becoming an instrument that turns your world around for you. That reminds me too much of those reality shows where fifteen young men line up and one of them will get the girl. I dislike the notion of magic happening to the one who shrieks the loudest...



I'm suspicious of the fairy godmother—guidance, yes, but not somebody doing it for you. I need to be able to feel that I've done it for myself. I think I've lived a lot of my life quite passively, waiting for somebody to make things happen magically. I'm very suspicious of that because you do all that waiting, and she never shows up!

What has most meaning for me at this stage, is to be my own instrument of change. I'm most comfortable with the notion that whatever transformation we achieve is through ourselves, through our own understanding and where we take ourselves... without bitterness, of course. I think the bitterness and hatred that some of us carry, gets in the way. The more that you can put that aside, look at your possibilities, and explore them, the better. That's what interests me about the story at this point.

***So what is the ball to you?***

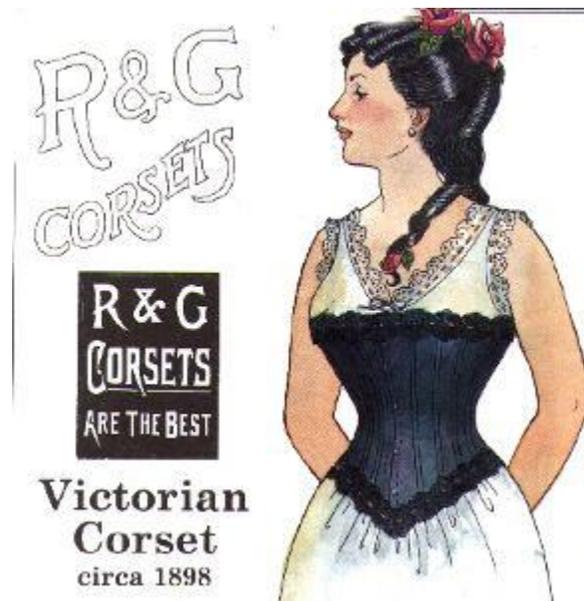
I can't help but see it as social expectations. Certainly, there's a sense of belonging and of having arrived. It's a big party, and, of course, whenever there's a big party, there I am on the outside. The ball is a hollow thing to me. It's just one night. It's not the real world.

***That Woody Allen quote comes to mind where he says "I wouldn't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member." So what club would you want to belong to? What would be your ball?***

Well, I'm big on compassion. I like people who give each other room to be who they are, instead of misinterpreting. If someone appears not to want to talk... instead of taking it personally, I would say, well, something's going on in her world. I'm not going to take it personally. I'm sure she doesn't mean to shut me out. That's the kind of society I want to be part of, one that gives people lots of room, and certainly allows them to be apart when they want to be, and to retreat with understanding. Fairly loose rules...

***So it's quite a different kind of ball that you perceive. There's much more acceptance.***

Yes, indeed. It wouldn't matter too much what you wore. Even, though, of course, I really like beautiful clothes, but the clothes wouldn't matter. You'd be coming as you are. As you want to be. As you feel comfortable. You would be bringing the best parts of yourself. Knowing you'd be accepted for who you are.



***You know, I have to tell you this. When I'm talking to you about this story, I feel closer to the real Cinderella than I've ever felt before! I think many of us have the conflict you're speaking about. We want to belong, we want to be part of the party, we want to be part of the celebration of life, but the terms of that celebration are not the terms that we would accept.***

And those terms could mean pinched feet. At times they meant girdles and corsets and incredibly uncomfortable things for people to wear, or to be, to win that acceptance, for people to think that they were beautiful.



***I remember my grandmother practically yodeling, "Pride is painful!"***

Whalebone corsets. My grandmother had whalebone corsets.

***And what was lost through that experience?***

Certainly, freedom was. When we think about the "lilies" (the Chinese bound feet) freedom was the first to go, wasn't it? I was recently reading *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. It's a novel written by an American author portraying the life of a young girl in

China, somewhere in the 1850s. She was a girl who came from a very poor family, and yet, she had beautiful feet, which was perceived by one of the matchmakers in the village. Her feet had the potential to be bound, and to come out beautifully. If that happened, then she could marry well and bring her whole family fortune and a better world. So she embarked on that journey.

I think something like 20 percent of the girls who had their feet bound died from it. When the feet were bound it was exquisitely painful and the girls had to learn to walk again on these bound feet. As they were walking, the bones in the foot broke. This had to happen. It was part of a whole process. The mothers scolded and cajoled, and loved in their way, but they believed utterly that this had to be done to their girls' feet. And you know, it didn't seem that there were many people at all who thought otherwise.

***That lands the fairy tale in reality and in history, in terms of how women have been restricted.***

Making your foot fit the shoe—and of course the feet were so bound and so destroyed that they could barely walk at all. And yet, the way they hobbled was perceived as beautiful.

Once, during my visits to podiatrists when I was a kid, I saw the foot of a Chinese woman. Her foot had been bound. It was just the bones, no longer attached to any body, just the chopped-off foot that had been bound. Talk about grotesque. But he had the bones of the foot in his office. They were in a glass case.

At that time, back in the fifties, there would have been quite a number of women still around, in China, who had bound feet. So it wasn't that far away.



***Beth, you have two daughters, and I'm wondering what you feel about what you're seeing in terms of the historic trend for women. Do you think that young women are moving towards a greater degree of freedom of their actual natures? Do you think we're on the right coach?***

I think we're mostly on the right coach. We're moving towards more freedoms, but I think it's something we need to pay attention to because there's a tendency to get onto the wrong road fairly quickly. Especially when you're young and impressionable. I think the excesses of Hollywood are to be feared for what they do to women and relationships and values... But mostly I see girls having a fair bit of choice about what they want to do, how they want to do it, and how they want to dress and proceed in the world.

There's also an issue with fathers. What you want from your wife is not what you want for your daughter. You want your daughter to be good as long as she's at home with you, but you want her to have power when she goes out in the world. You want her to have power with her spouse or whatever relationship is her choice... but how do you find that balance? She can't suddenly manage power if she's never had any power in her home. It has to be something that's developed along the road. I think a woman's power is a very delicate thing. Not to be taken for granted.

***I'm so glad that we found occasion to talk about this story in depth. Where would you say you are with Cinderella now? Is the fairy tale something you've thrown off, or is it still with you?***

Well, it's certainly with me in a new way since you asked if we might talk about it. Having waded into Cinderella waters again, I see I'm in a different place than I was the last time I was there. And I'm enjoying that. Perhaps in some months, or a year, I'll see it quite differently again. I suppose that's the magic of it.

For me, the magic of stories is that they go somewhere. When we're at points in our lives when we feel utterly lost and can't imagine there ever being an ending or a change, the stories show us that there can be. And you might get on that coach to progress on your own journey.

***Do you have a message for Cinderella?***

Stand up, Cinderella! (Or at least wear knee pads...)

