

Secondhand Cindy

an allegory

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Secondhand Cindy is based on a true story. It is the account of a broken woman with a secret past being tenderly pursued by a kind man with a secret of his own. Not just a love story, this is a tale of a love so powerful, yet so gentle, you might think it could only exist in a fairytale. Except, I assure you, the story is true. The resemblance to real people is intentional; only the names have been changed.

Secondhand Cindy is dedicated to everyone who has ever been discouraged or downhearted. It is especially dedicated to those who struggle with the pain of being disappointed in themselves.

May you be encouraged as you read.

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One Evening

There was another one. And another. Quickly the droplets of rain were falling steadily, soaking their way into the parched, wooden boardwalk.

Cindy stood in the doorway of the boardinghouse, becoming annoyed. She did not like rain and was sure she could do without it. She had not thought through the ramifications of such an existence; she just did not like rain. In fact, there were many things she did not like, but rain was certainly on that list. Now, with the unexpected downpour, she was going to be late. Moreover, when she *did* arrive she would be soaked, and her hair would be a mess.

She had not thought to bring her bonnet because her parasol was good for keeping the sun off her fair complexion. Now as evening fell, the parasol was mostly just part of her ensemble. It may also have helped with a few drops of rain, but Cindy had hesitated, hoping for a break in the drizzle; however, now it was pouring.

The sky had grown very dark as she waited, but shortly, the rain let up a little. "Oh well," she muttered under her breath. "Better late than never, as they say." Hooking her handbag over one arm and using her parasol for as much protection as it might be worth, she used her other hand to gather her flowing skirt so it would not drag in the mud of the unpaved street. Quickly she bounded off the boardwalk and began racing up the street toward Bakersfield Inn, the finest dining establishment in the town of Gregory. However, she had no sooner started out than the downpour began again.

Only one carriage was caught in the storm; its horse had become skittish. Just as Cindy came near the animal, a streak of lightning shot across the sky accompanied by a simultaneous clap of thunder. The huge beast bolted, knocking Cindy off her feet and face forward into the mud. At that precise moment, the carriage driver was looking away, so he did not see Cindy or his horse's contact with her. Startled by the steed's action, he was doing all he could to bring the animal under control. Within several hundred feet, he succeeded and then proceeded on his way.

For a stunned moment, Cindy lay in the mud. When she came to herself, her prior annoyance had become a seething anger with no one nearby on which to vent itself. In a state somewhere between rage and utter despair, she pushed herself up out of the mud and recovered her standing. Her clothes were completely drenched now, making them heavy and cumbersome. Everything, all the way to her skin, was laden with water. The front of everything, including her white gloves, also had a layer of mud. As soon as she had regained her balance, she began to drag herself back to the boardinghouse from where she had come.

Needless-to-say, the dinner engagement was off!

The shank of her parasol had broken when she fell. Adding insult to injury, the hem of her skirt snagged and tore on something when she stepped up onto the boardwalk. She was afraid to look up and see who noticed her condition when she walked into the small lobby of the boardinghouse. She just focused on the stairs at the far side and dragged a trail of mud and water across the wooden floor.

Once in her room, she shed her drenched clothing and left them in a heap on the floor. She dried off, brushed the mud out of her hair as best she could, and donned a flannel nightgown.

All things considered, the rain had been her friend in one way tonight. With the drenching she had received, no one could tell whether the water on her face was rain or

tears. Actually, it was both and though she towed one from her face, her eyes constantly renewed the other.

Angrily, she threw the towel onto the floor and sank into bed. She pulled the covers over her head and cried herself to sleep.

There was a gentle knock on the door. No answer. Another gentle knock. Still nothing.

The knock became a little louder. It was still gentle, but this time accompanied by a soft voice. "Cynthia?"

"Who is it?"

He could tell she had been asleep. "It's Christopher."

"Go away!"

After a moment, "I just wanted to see if you're all right. I waited for you at the inn. When you didn't come, I thought I should check on you."

"I'm fine. Now go away!"

"As you wish, my love. I hope you have a pleasant sleep. I will see you again tomorrow."

"NO!" she screamed. "I don't want to see you anymore! Now *please* just go away!"

After a brief pause, he said, "I love you, Cynthia."

Christopher waited a few seconds. He heard quiet sobs, as if muffled by a pillow. However, good to his word, he turned softly and withdrew down the hall. Descending the stairs, he crossed the lobby and went out into the evening.

The Morning

Between the disastrous episode last night and the restless night that ensued, Cindy awoke with a deep angst. She had anticipated a perfect dinner with her fiancé. Instead, she had ended up face down in the mud, followed by humiliation-on-parade. Who knew how many people had seen her like that? Yesterday, she had visions of the mountaintop; instead, she now found herself at the bottom of some deep, dark canyon.

To make matters unbearably worse, she thought she remembered shouting at Christopher and telling him that she never wanted to see him again. Was that part of the nightmare she had while she was asleep or part of the nightmare she had while she was awake?

Her mind rehearsed the rain, the horse, the mud, the dress ... the shouting. It was much more than she wanted to think about, but if she stopped thinking about all that, she might start thinking about something else. She surely did *not* want that.

Warring against all her emotions, she decided to go to the bistro for lunch. She had already wasted the morning reviewing the whole mess from last night. Over and over. Then over again. Her head ached almost as much as her heart.

She had to be the stupidest woman alive. Then she saw him out of the corner of her eye. He got up from his table and came over to sit down across from her; it was then that she decided he had to be the stupidest *man* alive.

She could not look him in the eye.

“What do you want?” she asked harshly.

“I told you last night that I would see you today.”

“I thought I told you I didn’t want to see you anymore.”

“You did.”

He let those two words linger. She could not see any connection. “All right,” she thought, “but you didn’t get the message?”

“So why are you here then?” she retorted.

“Because I told you last night I would see you today.”

“And you always do what you say?”

“I gave you my word, Cynthia. I chose to honor that.”

“Well, I don’t!” she snapped back, looking into his eyes for the first time during the encounter. “Always keep my word, I mean.” With that declaration, she looked away.

“Would you talk to me about that?”

She felt trapped. The first failure that came to her mind was missing dinner last night, but she could not help that. She simply was not going to walk into the finest dining establishment in Gregory with mud from head to toe. The more she hesitated, the more she realized he did not seem to be talking about last night at all ... that he knew something she had not told him. A cool chill ran down her back.

“I don’t want to talk right now,” she said, less defiant.

“Tomorrow?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she replied softly after a pause, still averting her gaze.

He pulled his wallet from his breast pocket and put enough money on the table to pay for her meal. She started to say something, but her shame held her back.

He leaned forward, intending for only her to hear, and said, "I love you, Cynthia." With that, he stood up and left.

Her eyes began to melt and run down her cheeks.

She looked at the other table where he had first been sitting. He had hardly eaten anything, but there was money on the table for his meal as well. It was as if he never intended to return to his table once he came to hers.

The Struggle

After she left the bistro, she found him sitting on one end of a bench in the small town park. Nearby was the gazebo where the town musicians gathered on Saturdays to entertain any who wandered by. She thought he might be there because it was one of his favorite places. Most nice days would find him there, speaking with passers-by.

Oh, how she never wanted to see him again, but oh, how she longed to speak to him one last time. The dichotomy churned inside her. He was a good man. A *very* good man. That was the problem She knew he was good, and she knew that she was not. She had never told him of her past; she was afraid. She thought that if he truly knew her, he would end their engagement. Now, here she was breaking it herself! He was the only good man who had ever taken an interest in her, and she regularly had done things to sabotage their relationship.

She thought about that for a moment, trying to determine why she did that. At first, she thought it was because he was too good for her, but she finally realized that it was actually the opposite—she was entirely too bad for him. True, those were just two coins in the same hand, but she saw a difference. She knew their alienation would only get worse if they continued to see each other.

It grieved her to the very core of her essence, but she had to make a clean break of it. She did long to see him once more though, to try to repair the damage her defensive ways had created. It was not just last night either. Anytime she thought her past might surface, she became erratic, hoping to cloud the matter ... to cause distractions lest her past life be discovered.

Slowly, haltingly, trying to find the words she would say, she moved ever closer to him and to an end she wanted and dreaded at the same time. Approaching from behind, she finally stood some twenty feet from the bench. She had decided this morning what she needed to do, but she wanted to retain at least a modicum of dignity. She had washed her dress, though the mud left a slightly darker shade to the material. Since her parasol was still damaged, she remembered her bonnet this time.

“Christopher?” she finally said, afraid to approach any closer. He stood and turned with a smile, but she did not look directly at him.

“Cynthia, my love.” He beckoned her to join him.

Cautiously, she walked around the other end of the bench and sat at the far end, away from where he had been sitting. Christopher noticed her distance and respected it, sitting back down on the end where he was when she spoke his name.

“I am truly glad to see you again,” he said.

She began to fidget with the diamond ring he had given her. She was not ready for the conversation which was about to begin. Nevertheless, here she was, and here it came.

“I” Something caught in her throat. Finally, she slid the betrothal gift from her finger, cleared her throat, and started again. “I can’t accept this. I cannot marry you.” Without looking, she held the ring out toward him, but he did not reach for it. After a brief time, she lowered it to the bench between them. The ring made a small click when she set it down.

“I respect you, and I respect your decision,” he said. She had dreaded what he might say, but his words were tender. “Would you tell me why?”

It was a perfectly reasonable question. She could not believe she had not expected it. The conversation had stalled.

After a moment, Christopher said, "I really am interested, Cynthia."

She drew another breath but held it while she waited for an answer to come to mind. All that came out of her mouth was, "Because."

Like most of their encounter a short time ago at the bistro, she had not made eye contact this time either, but she could hear the smile in his reply. "Does 'because' have a reason, or is it just 'because because'?" She knew he was not teasing at her expense; he never did things to hurt her. It was his gentle way of lightening a tense moment. He had said similar things before when the situation called for a calming touch.

A slight smile almost crept its way onto her face, but the torrent in her soul would not allow the smile to advance very far. Here she was having a conversation with her fiancé, or *now* ex-fiancé, and the words that were about to come out of her mouth were the very things in her past that made her despise—even hate—herself. Once her thoughts became audible, they could not be taken back. They would surely make him hate her too. She had taken his ring off, but she was not ready to take that final destructive step.

Therefore, she veered onto a tangent.

"I don't believe you can really love me," she finally stuttered. "I mean the real me. The person I really am." It was how she felt, but it was also a way of testing the waters, a way of seeing how badly the *real* reasons might destroy what little remained in his heart for her. Her face flushed as she realized what possible thoughts must be going through his mind because of her ambiguous remarks. Perhaps it would have been better to just tell her past straight out rather than let his imagination run wild. "Then again," she reasoned to herself, "nothing he thinks will make him hate me any more than the truth. It's hopeless. It is over."

At that, she put her face in her hands and broke down in tears.

After her weeping subsided, Christopher spoke, "Cynthia, do you remember that evening at the social when we first met?"

With her face still in her hands, she nodded but said nothing.

"What did you feel that evening?"

She paused, recalling the moment. "Elation," she said, speaking through her hands. "And giddiness."

"What have you felt about me since that day?"

This was a harder question. That social was two years ago. Her feelings had covered a lot of ground since then.

"Have you felt romance?"

After a moment, she said "Yes."

"Have you felt friendship?"

"Yes."

"Interest?"

"Yes, I have felt all these things and more, but I don't understand why you are asking me this."

He paused a moment and then asked "Have you ever been annoyed with me?"

She was right now! She hesitated for a moment and then concurred.

"Have you ever been angry with me?"

She waited longer to give this answer and only nodded as if a nonverbal response might be less offensive.

“Have you ever hated me?”

At the moment, her emotions were such a tangled knot that she did not know whether she had or not. She was sure that when he knew the truth, he would not love her anymore. She was sure that *then* she *would* hate him.

While she pondered her answer, Christopher changed his question. “Well, have you ever hated *anyone*?”

That one was easier. She had hated many people, including herself. She nodded again.

“Darling, those are emotions. Those are the ways people feel. And you just admitted yourself that you have felt a whole range of emotions, many of them about me at various times.” He let that sink in for a few moments.

“We use the word ‘love’ to mean several different things. However, the highest form of the word is not a feeling at all. It is a decision someone makes. It is one person’s commitment to another person.”

Now *that* *REALLY* made her angry. “How romantic!” she thought sarcastically. “Does the man have ice water in his veins? How cold can he be? Maybe it is best if I am just rid of him.” However, she did not really want to believe that.

“You think that is cold, don’t you?” he questioned.

She winced when she heard her own word come out of his mouth, but she did not know how to reply.

After a moment, Christopher continued. “I have chosen to love you, Cynthia. That should not strike you as cold. On the contrary, that should give you a sense of comfort.”

“How would something that detached give me any comfort?” she snapped, looking into his eyes for the first time since lunch.

“Would you feel more comfort if the man you loved left you every time his emotions called for it?”

Suddenly, almost involuntarily, she jumped up off the bench. “I am sorry, Christopher. I must go now,” she said, stumbling away as quickly as she could see through blurred eyes.

“I love you, Cynthia,” he called out behind her.

She hurried to the boardinghouse, through the door, across the lobby, and up the stairs. Once safely in her room, she leaned back against the door and began weeping bitterly. She did not blame Christopher for what he said; there was no way he could know about Damon.

The Floodgate

Late that afternoon, there was a gentle knock at the door.

"Cynthia?" It was Christopher.

"Yes," she said groggily. She had been asleep for almost three hours.

"May I ask you out for a carriage ride? Not right now. Perhaps I could call for you in an hour."

His tender persistence *did* give her a sense of security, but what she dreaded was how long that persistence would continue—how long that security would remain—how long that peace would last once he found out all the things she had held back from him.

Usually and ideally by the time people become engaged, there is enough openness between them that any secrets in the past should have been revealed and dealt with. To be just weeks from the wedding and still have skeletons in the cupboard was like a spark looking for a way to break out into a roaring flame, ready and able to consume and destroy everything she ever wanted.

"I don't know, Christopher."

"Please?"

She delayed her reply for a moment and then consented.

"Excellent," he answered. "I will stop by in about an hour."

As promised, an hour later, Christopher walked into the lobby and headed for the stairs.

"I am here, Christopher," Cindy said. She had waited for him in a chair in the corner of the lobby.

He turned to her and smiled. Walking over, he politely extended his elbow. She slipped her hand onto his arm, and they walked out to his waiting carriage. He helped her up to the seat, then walked around behind the carriage and climbed up beside her.

"I took the liberty of bringing a picnic supper," he told her.

Her heart softened. "Why," she thought, "must he make it so hard for me to do what I must do?" She had determined in the hour before his return that if she had any respect for him at all, she must open the door to her yesterdays. It was only fair that he know who she really was, even though it would strike the fatal blow to her dreams. Maybe, he would not hate her completely. Perhaps, he would at least be polite as they passed on the street.

Their picnic dinner was spread. Christopher, in his usual way, took her hand, bowed his head, and gave thanks for their meal. When he finished, Cindy drew a breath and then quickly spoke, as if to say something at this very moment that she might not be able to say the next.

"Christopher, I must tell you something before we eat."

"Fine," he said.

"Well, you can eat, but I have to talk before I"

"No," he insisted. "I can wait."

"Well" She was not looking at him again. When she did, it was at his shoulders. She knew she could not look into his eyes and say what she had to say.

After a pause he said, "I can tell that something is hurting you very deeply, Cynthia."

She almost broke down at that point, but she looked up into the sky, brushed the hair back from her face, and stiffened her spine.

"Christopher" There was a brief pause as she held her breath. "I have been with a man before."

There! She had finally started. She had turned the knob and cracked the door open ever so slightly.

"I see," he replied. "And that is what has been bothering you? That is what you have been afraid to tell me?"

Another brief pause, then she hung her head and said, "No."

"He left you?" he asked.

She nodded, head still down.

"And *that* is what you have been afraid to tell me?"

Again a pause. "No." Her voice squeaked.

He noticed her lips quivering and saw tears drop to her lap.

"There was another man after him?" he asked. He was reading her like an open book.

By this time, her shoulders quivered with her quiet sobs. "Oh, Chri ... stopher, there ... there were ... many ... other men," she sobbed. "There were so *MANY* other men."

Cindy wept as if she would die. Christopher waited.

When she could manage, she began speaking again. "When Damon found out I was going to have a baby, he got angry and left me. I was so upset that I cast everything to the wind. I started working in a tavern, and then I started drinking. One night, I met a man at the tavern. I think his name was Lucius." She then related a sordid tale of months of a painful, destructive existence.

"My reputation was in shreds," she continued. "The baby was born only six months along; the doctor scolded me for my drinking and said I had harmed my child. The little one lived for almost two days, but then he was gone. I didn't even have any money to pay for the burying. Or even the doctor." She told Christopher she ended up staying with her brother and his wife on their nearby farm while she recovered. Then she moved to Gregory hoping for a fresh start. Shortly afterward, she met Christopher at the social. The next year, they became engaged.

When she finished her account, she sat in a quiet heap. Her head and her shoulders both sunk low, both quivering with her silent weeping. The door she opened had actually been a floodgate, and the retelling of such personal poison had drained the very life out of her. As she slumped there, she became aware of the magnitude of it all.

"Oh, Christopher," she blurted out. "What have I done? *Whatever* have I done?"

She dreaded the thought but knew she had to look him in the eye and face his contempt. She deserved it. She had earned it. She was just glad it was finally over and hoped he would not make a public disgrace of her.

Slowly, she raised her eyes. She still could not see his face past the brim of her bonnet, so she began to raise her head. When she could finally see him, to her surprise, he had a pleasant countenance.

"Thank you for telling me about that," he said. "I know it was difficult for you." Then leaning toward her and raising his eyebrows he whispered, "Cynthia, I love you."

Christopher had picked up the ring before he left the park bench that afternoon. To her utter amazement, he took it from his pocket, reached for her hand, and slid the slender circle back into place. "I still want you to marry me," he said.

Suddenly, Cindy sensed a peace that she had never known, not even *before* Damon. She was still the same Cindy. How could she ever forgive *herself*? However, in that moment, she realized that Christopher finally knew everything about her and he still loved her. She didn't know how, she didn't even know why, she only knew that he did. In at least one person's eyes, she was no longer Cindy ... she was Cynthia. In his eyes, she was forgiven; in her eyes, that was enough.

The Gown

After lunch the next day, they walked in the park. They sat on the same bench where they had been just the previous day. Oh, what a difference one day made. Actually, what a difference love made! Christopher was right—she felt a great peace.

Cynthia sat down on the bench, but this time, she sat next to Christopher. The decorum of the time called for a certain distance between a couple in public, but after she had been seated and he sat down beside her, she scooted toward him a little bit to make sure there was absolutely no more space between them than etiquette required.

She looked up at him, and he smiled at her.

Then she looked down at her hand and began to fidget with her ring again. Not that she was thinking of taking it off; she would never do that again as long as she lived. It was just a way to keep her hands busy while her mind was putting words together.

“Christopher?”

“Yes, my love.”

She paused, so he continued. “Feel free to ask me, Cynthia.”

Finally, she worked up the courage. “The gown you got for me? My wedding dress? The one you bought for me last month?” she queried, sounding as if he had bought her more than one wedding gown.

“Yes?”

She had done so much to hurt him in the past hours she did not know how to say what she wanted to say.

“The dress?” she continued.

“Yes, the dress.”

“I really do like it.”

“I am glad you do; I like it as well. It is becoming on you.”

“But … but Christopher?”

“Yes, Darling.” She paused again, so he asked, “Is there something wrong with it?”

Finally, she said, “It’s white.”

“Yes, I noticed that too,” he said. Then with a little chuckle, he added, “That *is* the traditional color of a wedding dress, you know.”

“I know, Christopher.” She hung her head. He saw a tear squeeze out of her eye and linger on her cheek.

“But?” he queried.

“But white represents purity.” She was going to say more, but that was all that came out.

“And why is that a problem?” he asked.

The tear had companions now. “How can I make you understand, Christopher?”

Their time at the picnic had given her a real measure of peace, so her question was not in anger or even frustration. She just wanted him to comprehend her misgivings at wearing white in light of her dark past.

“Cynthia.” He touched her chin and guided her face to look up at him. “My dear Cynthia, may I be so bold as to tell you that it is actually you who do not understand? You told me of your past. It is gone—forever gone. You are my pure bride, and I love you deeply and forever.”

More tears flooded her eyes, but these were good tears.

He continued, “If you ever need to talk to me about anything, even what hurts you from those days, you must know that you are free to do so. I will be here for you, I will listen to you, and I will comfort you. Nevertheless, you must also remember that all of that—everything which burdens you and brings you shame—all of that is gone. I will never bring the matter up to you.” Then he added, “I insist that you wear white.”

Cynthia was finally learning what it meant to be loved by this man. She was not only forgiven. She was not even just Cynthia; she was clean! What a treasure he had just given her.

She leaned toward him and kissed his cheek. He smiled. “Let them whisper,” she thought, “and let them gossip.” She cherished Christopher and wanted him to know it.

The Intrusion

"I am truly sorry to bother you, Sir, but I didn't know what else to do."

"Ah, Mr. Clement, you did exactly the right thing." Christopher spoke softly. "I thank you for sending for me. Now, what is the cost of the damages, my good man?"

"Well ..." Clement said, running a tally in his head. "She broke seven bottles when she threw hers, and then there was the bottle she threw—the one she was drinking from. Begging your pardon, Sir, but she wouldn't even take a proper glass. She was drinking directly from the bottle, she was."

"Yes, I see," Christopher said.

"Then there was the bottle she had before that one. That is a total of nine bottles." Mr. Clement went on to describe several other items that had fallen victim to Cynthia's wrath.

Christopher did not ask for further evidence of the claim, but he could see some of the proof that had been gathered together and swept into the corner. "I understand, my friend," he said, "and again, thank you for coming to me about this."

Clement gave him a total sum. Christopher pulled out his wallet and paid for the broken property. Then he walked across the room to where Cynthia was laying back in a chair, passed out. Christopher tenderly gathered her up in his arms; he carried her to the boardinghouse and up to her room. He gently laid her on the bed, covered her, and departed.

She only said a few words through their entire meal. Christopher saw sadness on her face as they dined, even though she would not look directly at him. It had been several weeks—about the time of the picnic—since she had been unable to look at him directly, but tonight, she was struggling with that problem again.

As they left the inn, Christopher prompted her. "Come my darling, won't you tell me what troubles you?"

After some delay she said, "Christopher, I am so ashamed about what I did last night. I have betrayed you again. I feel so worthless—so hollow—as if I have made no progress at all."

"Can you tell me what happened?" He was drawing her out.

Cynthia preferred not to say anything, but she was learning not to keep things from him. There was only heartache and alienation down that path. She determined to avoid that easier but more perilous way.

"Christopher?"

"Yes, my love."

"Something happened which distressed me terribly."

"Yes?"

She hesitated. "I went to the market yesterday as I sometimes do."

"Did you? What treasures did you find?" he inquired. She was slow to answer, but he waited.

Relying without answering, she said, "I saw someone there."

"A friend?"

"No." She was thinking—choosing her words. "He was someone I knew back"
In mid-sentence, her words ran out.

Christopher continued to draw her out. "What did he have to say?"

"We did not speak. I saw him across the way."

"Did he see you?"

"Yes." Then she paused. She did not do that as often as she used to either, but this was one of those occasions. "Actually, Christopher, I must tell you all. He was with four other men I knew back then. They all spoke softly to each other and pointed at me. Then... they laughed and walked away."

After a brief silence, he spoke. "I am sorry they hurt you, my dear. Is there something I can do?"

A hesitation, then she spoke. "Dearest Christopher, I have already subjected you to so much indignity by my past ..."

Christopher broke in. "What past?" He always asked that question anytime she looked back to her yesterdays, not to correct her, but as a gentle reminder that he would never hold any of that history against her.

Cynthia was momentarily at a loss for words. She knew he had released all of that from his mind, but he had given her permission to speak of it if she needed. She felt she must bring it up again to make him understand. "I truly thank you for your kindness, my dear, but I am speaking of the past when I knew those men."

He saw that she got his point. "I understand, Cynthia. Please forgive my interruption."

"I just do not want them to think of me the way they remembered me back then. It only reflects on you, and I do not want them to think ill of you or me. Can you understand that?"

"I do indeed," he assured her. "It delights me that you are concerned about what others think of me. Please allow me a few thoughts. You have told me of your past, and that history is settled between us. However, as much as you wish for it, you cannot change what you have done or what others think of you because of it. Additionally, you can do little to change what they think of me. No matter how well, how lovingly, or how carefully we live our lives, some people believe what they *want* to believe, and there is little you can do to change that. That is especially true when they base their thoughts of you upon something you cannot change, like your past. You must never weary yourself in the present chasing after their judgments of the past." Christopher continued, "Most importantly, my dearest Cynthia, you must always remember that nothing, including strangers from the past, can change my love for you. That is settled forever."

With disregard for what someone might say, she pressed herself close to his side as they walked. With equal disregard for what others might say, he gently put his arm around her shoulders.

The Journey

Cynthia and Christopher dined at the Bakersfield Inn. It would be their last meal there. He had been in Gregory on business for most of these three years, but he had completed his venture. Tomorrow he would leave for the city to finish some dealings there. On his way, he would also stop by to see a certain doctor and an undertaker to pay off some unsettled accounts.

He had sent for two of his servant ladies to attend to his bride. He also had summoned two coachmen to escort them safely to the city the day after his departure. Then, the third day, they would be married. Cynthia knew that he was a prosperous businessman and that his holdings included a reasonable wealth. She even knew that he had several servants—even a butler he had brought with him to Gregory. However, she had no idea that he had enough servants that he could spare four of them for her. Back in the city, he had several other servants who had been carrying out his arrangements for the wedding.

“I wish you would not go away, Christopher.”

“I shall miss you, my dearest Cynthia.” She liked it when he called her that.

“I shall miss you too, Christopher. I just wish I could travel with you.”

“I understand, Darling, but I must make sure all is ready.” He looked deeply into her eyes and said, “My dearest bride, you are going to be very pleased with the arrangements.”

In the morning, they dined together and said longing goodbyes. Then he gave final instructions to the servants, mounted his horse, and began the day’s journey toward his home city accompanied by his butler.

The Wedding

The travels—Christopher on the one day and his bride the next—were uneventful although Cynthia marveled at new and beautiful sights along the journey.

She and her entourage arrived just after sunset. She was escorted to an enchanting but rather large cottage on the outskirts of the city. After a time of refreshments, she was ushered into a grand bedroom for her night's stay on the eve of the wedding.

In the morning, she awoke early. Pulling back the charming curtains, she looked out at the most wonderful view. She saw that the cottage was situated on a hill covered with tall grasses. To her left, the hill descended into a gorgeous valley. In the dell was a field surrounded by a stunning array of beautiful flowers. Children skipped and played games while sheep grazed on the far side beyond a fence.

To the right, the hill ascended to a high peak, on top of which stood magnificent white stone buildings. "My, what the view must be like for the people living up there!" she thought.

Just then, Annia, one of the servant ladies who had accompanied Cynthia on yesterday's journey, entered the room. "Good morning, m' lady."

"Oh yes, isn't this a gorgeous morning, Annia?"

"Indeed, Mum. And if ya asks me, it is bein' a perfect day for a weddin'."

"Oh, the wedding..." Cynthia whispered through a huge smile, flopping backward across the bed, hands behind her head.

"And you'll be makin' the most beautiful bride ever in the land, Missus."

"Oh Annia, do you really think so?"

"Indeed I does, Missus. Master Christopher does too. He done nothing but go on and on about ya every time he come back from his travels for a visit."

That unexpected endorsement warmed Cynthia. Today would be a busy day with all the preparations and the late afternoon wedding, but Cynthia allowed herself the brief luxury of a few moments' worth of pleasant memories. She was drinking her tears today, and they were sweet.

She had barely survived the wretched shame of being someone's castaway. Actually, a whole bunch of someones had used her and cast her away. A sense of great remorse almost swept her away, but Annia's busyness around the room soon returned Cynthia's thoughts to today—*this* day—her wedding day. The past was gone now. She was only hours away from becoming the wife of surely one of the most successful businessmen in the land. It brought her great peace that she did not have to hide her past from him. He knew everything. He still loved her.

The wedding had been amazing. Before he had left to come to the city, Christopher had told Cynthia about some of the arrangements he had made. She had anticipated a grand ceremony, but the reality was so much more than she expected.

After the ceremony, the guests left the church and began to make their way toward the reception. Cynthia and Christopher returned to the cottage to rest briefly and allow the guests to assemble at the reception hall before they made their grand entrance.

They sat on the divan in each other's arms, basking in the splendor of the ceremony they had just enjoyed, a ceremony that joined them as bride and groom.

"My dearest husband, this has been a most wonderful day. You have made me the happiest woman in the world!"

"I am glad you are enjoying it as much as I am, my precious bride," he said. "I am very happy too."

"I don't want it to ever end," she said.

"It won't, my love. After all, we promised 'until death do us part'."

"I know," she said, nuzzling her head into his shoulder. "But I mean today ... I don't want *today* to ever end."

"Well," he said with a sparkle in his voice, "we do still have the reception ahead of us."

"Oh, tell me about it again, Christopher. Where is it to be held?"

"It will be in the grand hall which is part of the residence on top of this very hill."

She sat up with a start and a smile, eyes wide open. "In the white stone buildings I saw out the window?" she questioned.

"The very place," he said.

"How marvelous!" she exclaimed. Then, almost apologetically, "Oh, my dearest Christopher, would it be too much to hope that we might be able to spend the night there? I do so long to look upon the beautiful valley in the morning."

"Of course, we can stay the night," he assured her. "That is our new home. I had it built for you."

The dark of evening had settled in when the groom and his new bride arrived at the reception. They traveled in a large coach drawn by four horses, the same carriage that had carried Cynthia to the church and the blissful couple back to the cottage. Before today, Cynthia had never ridden in a coach drawn by four horses.

The carriage seemed to go across what sounded like a wooden bridge. Then it stopped at one of the large stone buildings that was part of her new home.

When they stopped, a coachman opened the door. Christopher climbed out of the coach and then lifted his pretty bride to the ground. Annia came along behind to hold the train of Cynthia's exquisite white wedding gown.

Other men, whom she assumed to be more servants, opened two large wooden doors. The grandeur was more than she could assimilate, more than she could have ever imagined.

As the bride and groom paused at the entrance to the great hall, they saw that their guests were arranged at tables lining the outer walls. The light was so dazzling that prisms of color danced around the crystal goblets and silver settings on the tables. A red carpet runner traveled toward a large head table across the far end of the hall. Two tall, wooden chairs—one for Christopher and the other for Cynthia—stood behind the generous head table that was decorated with beautiful bouquets of flowers like the ones she had seen from the cottage window that very morning.

As the happy couple entered the great hall, the trumpeters announced their arrival with a joyous fanfare. The friends and guests all stood to applaud and cheer the wedded pair as they entered the festive reception. The musicians began to play the most delightful melodies.

Cynthia had been so enamored at the splendor of the wedding and especially with her handsome young groom standing at the front of the church that she had not previously focused on any of the guests. However, as they approached the front table, she saw, seated beyond and above their two empty chairs, someone she thought she recognized. He wore purple clothing trimmed in white fur. Suddenly, she remembered his face from a painting she once had seen.

“Christopher!” she whispered in awe. “How did you ever get the king to attend our wedding?”

“It was not difficult, my love. He is my father.”

Epilogue

I told you at the beginning that this story is true. It is.

Christ came into this world to take for Himself a bride ... the people who trust in Him ... His church. For reasons known only to Himself, the bride He has chosen is a bride with a past. An angry past. A sordid past. An ugly past. A past that sometimes even spills into the present. It is a past for which we sometimes condemn others while we ourselves are as guilty as they are. In one way or another, we all have a past that makes us unfit to be His bride *for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God*¹ and *the wages of sin is death.*²

In our story, the prince had to suffer the cost of his beloved's past. In the real story, Christ can forgive His beloved's past, but only by having given His own life in order to redeem the life that His bride forfeited by her willfulness. *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all*³ but *the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*⁴

There are no greater treasures than what Christ gives to those who trust in Him—including the forgiveness of our sins, the removal of our guilt, reconciliation to God, and life everlasting—all at the cost of the cross that Jesus willingly took upon Himself.

*Moreover, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, For I delivered unto you first of all that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: And that he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once.*⁵

One day the Prince of Peace will return to earth to take His bride to the new home He has prepared for her. She has not earned it; she never could. It is a gift of His amazing grace, earned by Him when He gave *himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a people of His own.*⁶

My friend, I truly hope that you have found that gift of forgiveness and redemption through Jesus Christ. If you have not, I pray that you will humble your heart before God today and confess your sins. Acknowledge your need for His mercy and grace, and ask for His tender forgiveness because of Christ's finished work on the cross. He is loving and gracious to all who turn to Him in repentance and faith, for *if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*⁷

¹ Romans 3:23

² Romans 6:23a

³ Isaiah 53:6

⁴ Romans 6:23b

⁵ Excerpted from 1 Corinthians 15:1-6

⁶ Titus 2:14

⁷ 1 John 1: 9

The Secondhand Cindy Project

This project's initial release was in the autumn of 2014 when the author released the PDF version and placed the story into the public domain.

Project plans include multiple electronic versions (PDF, e-book, etc.) an audio version, and a printed version. It is our intention that the electronic files created under this project will be available free of charge; we also plan for the printed version to be available at as low a cost as possible. Please see our Facebook page for details. We will post updates there about new formats with links as new releases come out.

Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/SecondhandCindy>

It is the author's desire that this story be read as widely as possible. You are encouraged to share it with any who would be uplifted by it. You may also convert the story into other formats and translate it into other languages as you wish.