

CINDERELLA AND THE GLASS CEILING

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Illustration by Min Heo

 Saved

Once upon a time, there was a strong and resilient young woman named Cinderella, who lived with a mean, demanding, and, frankly, abusive

stepmother and two bratty, dimwitted stepsisters. They spent their time painting bad selfies that they called “selfie portraits,” and they thought that almond milk came from cows who ate almonds. Cinderella’s mother had died tragically, and her father quickly remarried after just a few dates, before you can really know who a person is. Soon after, Cinderella’s father died, too.

The stepmother resented Cinderella for her fortitude in the face of adversity and for being the only one in the family without a widow’s peak. She kept the father’s money for herself and paid Cinderella the minimum wage to be a lowly servant. Cinderella would’ve loved to be a household manager or one of those well-paid butler types, but those roles always went to the men in the kingdom.

Rent was high in the big city, so the only place that Cinderella could afford to live was her stepmother’s fireplace, which had a rodent problem and was misleadingly advertised as a cozy studio. On the bright side, the commute was short.

One day, an invitation to a ball, hosted by the royal prince, arrived at the house. The prince was looking for a bride, and he thought the best way to find one he hadn’t already dated would be to throw a massive party, invite all of the maidens in the kingdom, and then pick one, in what he called a “rose ceremony.”

Cinderella was ecstatic! “Could marrying the prince be my way out of poverty? Could I really be royalty? Maybe! Why not?” she mused to her only friends, a bunch of mice.

“Ew, gross. You can’t come to the ball with us,” one of her stepsisters said, when she found Cinderella sewing a ball gown out of curtains. “People will think you, like, live with us.”

“I do live with you,” Cinderella replied.

Besides, the invitation clearly read “all maidens.” She’d go to the ball in her fabulous curtain dress, capture the prince’s heart, and finally find out the difference between crudités and raw vegetables.

But, before Cinderella could leave for the ball, her stepmother sabotaged her plan. Acknowledging that it is a stepmother’s job in fairy tales to be evil and jealous of her stepdaughter, she ripped Cinderella’s dress in two and screamed, “I don’t have a good reason not to like you, but I just don’t! You can’t come!” and then rode away in a carriage with her two daughters. Cinderella ran outside in tears. Now she didn’t have a dress or curtains.

Suddenly, a small, elderly, kind-faced woman appeared in a cloud of silver smoke.

“Mibbidi-mobbidi-moo!” she sang. “It’s me, your fairy godmother! Dry your tears, Cinderella. You *can* go to the ball.”

And with a swoop of her wand, she turned a pumpkin into a carriage, Cinderella’s mice friends into coachmen, and her rags into a beautiful bedazzled ball gown. She also gave her a few more party essentials—breath mints (formerly a piece of lint), décolletage bronzer (formerly birdseed), and red lipstick (formerly pink lipstick).

“Off you go now!” said the fairy godmother as she handed Cinderella two glass slippers and disappeared into a flurry of blue bubbles.

“This is my only hope for never cleaning my stepmother’s bidet again,” Cinderella told herself, as she slipped on the glass shoes. “Let’s get this prince to fall in love with me!”

The ball was sensational—with a fountain of champagne, a full orchestra, and a bathroom that had a basket with extra hair ties.

“Would you care to dance?” a deep voice behind her asked.

Cinderella whirled around. It was the prince! And although he wasn't as tall as he claimed in his palace bio, she was pleased to see that he was generically handsome.

“Oh, Cinderella, you're everything I've been looking for!” the prince murmured as they spun around the dance floor.

“Tonight is perfect,” Cinderella said.

The prince was moving quickly—Cinderella couldn't believe her luck. She was one step closer to financial security and being famous enough for people to pay her to post sponsored content.

But then she took another step and heard a loud CRUNCH. She felt a shooting pain in her left foot.

“Oh. My. God,” Cinderella said.

She could feel a giant glass shard stabbing the arch of her foot. Her glass slipper had shattered.

“What was that?” asked the prince.

“Oh, nothing,” said Cinderella, not wanting to ruin the mood. CRUNCH. Cinderella took another step. CRUNCH. CRUNCH.

“O.K., I definitely heard that one,” the prince said.

“I think my, um, glass slipper might have broken. It's not a big deal. I'm fine! Let's keep dancing,” Cinderella said, trying to smile, while blood pooled in her shoe.

“Hold up. You're wearing slippers made of *glass*?” the prince asked.

“Technically, they're glass heels,” Cinderella said, as she looked around the room at the other women's footwear: satin, sequins, and a few flip-flops on

blistered feet. “Wait a second. Is glass not something that royals typically wear?” she asked.

The prince took a second to assess the situation and then realized what the deal was.

“Oh! You must be one of the poor ones we invited,” he said.

Cinderella watched the prince instantly lose interest and begin to scan the room, looking for other maidens to dance with.

“Owww—ahhh—I love dancing so much!” Cinderella yelled, trying to cover the sound of crackling glass. Judging from the look on the prince’s face, it wasn’t working.

“Let’s take a break,” the prince said, slowly backing away.

“No, please!” said Cinderella, pulling him toward her. “I’m having a great time. I thought the mini quiche was incredible. I ate it in one bite!”

“That’s disgusting,” scoffed the prince. “Everyone knows about the four-bite rule. A mini quiche should take you a good ninety minutes to finish.”

Cinderella tried to go back to dancing, but without moving her feet. She looked like one of those inflatable tube men outside of carriage dealerships.

“I don’t want a little broken glass to ruin this date,” Cinderella said. “It’s really important. If you don’t fall in love with me, I’m going to be dusting floorboards for the rest of my life.”

“I mean, that’s not really on me,” said the prince.

Wow. The prince was being a real dungeon-bag. But he was also an easy way out of Cinderella’s dreadful roommate situation. Her mind raced—should she try to make it work with this guy, or should she tell him off and spit in his champagne? Convincing herself that maybe he was just hangry, since all

the rich-people food was so small, she decided on the former.

“I actually didn’t buy these glass slippers myself,” Cinderella explained. “They were a gift, and it seemed rude not to wear them.”

“When I think a gift is ugly, I just throw it away,” the prince retorted.

“They were my only option,” said Cinderella. “I don’t own another pair of shoes.”

“Not even boat shoes?” the prince asked. “Or those ones with the red bottoms that ladies love?”

“I sleep in a fireplace,” Cinderella snapped. “How would I know anything about gender-normative footwear?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. You sleep in a fireplace?”

“Yeah, that’s why my name is *Cinder-ella*.”

“I thought it was just a trendy name, like Brooklyn,” said the prince.

Cinderella began to tear up, and not because this reminded her of how she could never find her name on one of those souvenir keychains. She realized that she’d been pretending to be someone she wasn’t to win over this loser, because he was in a better socioeconomic position than her. She deserved love just the way she was—without a designer ball gown or a sweet carriage. Also, her foot really freaking hurt.

“Can someone get this woman a mop so she can clean up all this foot blood?” the prince shouted.

“Where is my fairy godmother when I need her?” Cinderella cried. “I’ve got to get out of here.”

Her fairy godmother appeared in a poof of purple glitter.

“Fibbidi-fobbidi—oh, dear!” she shrieked, when she saw the blood spilling out from Cinderella’s shoe. “What happened to your foot?”

“The glass slippers,” Cinderella replied.

“You put those on your feet?” the fairy godmother asked. “I guess I should have been clearer. Those are paperweights.”

“They’re what?” Cinderella said.

“You were supposed to give them to the king and queen as a hostess gift,” explained the fairy godmother. “If they were shoes, I would have put them on your feet myself. I specifically remember handing them to you.”

“I’m a servant!” Cinderella cried. “How am I supposed to know that rich people like paperweights in the shape of shoes?”

“My bad,” said the fairy godmother.

The prince picked up the unbroken right shoe and placed it on his head.

“Maybe it’s a hat!” he said. “What do you think of my glass hat?”

Everyone in the ballroom laughed at the prince’s bad joke. It was the hardest they’d laughed since the time he made a joke about a priest, a rabbi, and a minotaur walking into a tavern.

Cinderella wasn’t sure if it was watching the prince make fun of her or her recent blood loss, but she started to get light-headed.

“You know what?” she screamed. “Maybe I was stupid to put the glass slippers on my feet, but don’t tell me any of the heels in this room are any more comfortable! Are they? Are they?”

“They’re not!” a nearby brunette replied, waving a flip-flop in the air. The rest of the room grew silent, watching.

“I’ll say it. I was trying to win the royal lottery by coming tonight,” Cinderella continued. “But social mobility is a false promise that is perpetuated by the privileged but almost never pans out, because the system is broken. What I’d actually need to do to get out of poverty is nearly impossible, because you rich people have set up the world in your favor. And I’m not talking party favors. Although, I’ve seen the swag bag, and it’s exceptional.”

People started approaching the gift-bag table as Cinderella continued to talk.

“I’m in this situation because the world has set me up to fail. For me to get an education and achieve financial stability, I need to pray I get some sort of grant or scholarship or magic beans. And if I am lucky enough to receive help, I’ll still have to work two jobs on the side to squeak by. I’ll be buried in student loans, living paycheck to paycheck, with nothing to fall back on and no one to help me. Any setback—medical bills, losing a job, getting cursed by an evil witch—could mean ruin.”

Everyone in the castle stared at the prince, waiting for his response.

“Look, Cindy,” he muttered. “I’d hire you here at the castle, but the only job openings are for royal advisers. You know, important, high-level stuff that a woman can’t do.”

“This is what I’m talking about!” Cinderella shouted. “On top of everything I’ve just said, I’m also being held back because I’m a woman. But guess what? You see how I broke this glass slipper? Watch how I break the glass ceiling!”

Everyone in the room ducked for cover and peered nervously at the glass dome above the ballroom.

“Not the actual glass ceiling, you idiots! I’m talking about the metaphorical glass ceiling that represents the invisible barrier holding back women and minorities from advancing professionally—I can’t believe you’re all opening

your gift bags while I'm giving this speech.”

Cinderella hobbled out of the room, yelling over one shoulder, “I’ll go to school, get a job, rise through the ranks, and call myself Chief Glass Disrupter on my business card, because I’ll work at one of those cool companies where you make up your own title. You’ll see. All of you!” In the doorway, she added, “Oh, and by the way, ‘crudités’ is just a fancy word for regular vegetables.”

In the coming months and years, Cinderella did everything that she said she would do. It wasn’t easy, of course, but Cinderella persisted. She shattered the glass ceiling into as many pieces as she had shattered that stupid glass paperweight.

And she did it in flats.

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