

# Once Upon a Time

by Elizabeth Argall

Once upon a time, in the sort of place where fairytales happen and everyone is good or bad and seldom in the middle, there was a pretty little cottage that sat on the outskirts of a pretty little town.

In this pretty little cottage there lived three pretty young things, although they didn't particularly like being called pretty young things. These three sisters much preferred to be called Agnes, Florence and Celina. Well that isn't entirely true, Agnes and Florence liked to be called Agnes and Florence, but Celina preferred to be called Cinders. Agnes and Florence didn't really like calling their young sister Cinders, but they did it anyway to make her feel happy. Cinders liked to be called Cinders because she spent a lot of time by the hearth where it was warm, smoky and grubby and she felt that a name should be an accurate reflection of a person not some fancy thing to make a person seem more important than they are.

And when I say there were three pretty young things, erm sorry, pretty young women in the house perhaps it would be more accurate to say there were two pretty young women in the house and one young woman who could be pretty if she only stopped to wash her face once in a while and pull the sticks and burrs from her hair.

Agnes was a wonderful knitter, she would sit and knit for hours and hours, knitting fantastic landscapes which held musical magical mysteries, knitting rainbows, dreams and teapots and very warm jumpers. Every evening Agnes would sit near the fire (but not too close) and pull long lengths of rainbow coloured wool from her special homemade bag and turn the knit threads into wonderful somethings (sometimes Agnes would crochet or embroider or even do a tapestry when she felt adventurous).

The rascally cat Morachio would sit by Agnes' knee and purr loudly as he contemplated which exquisite piece of handicrafts he would destroy next. Agnes would look down at the remains of the knitted triptych portraying the slaying of the hydrafiend by the hero of many muscles and sigh a little. Then she would put down her knitting and get Morachio a saucer of milk explaining on the way to whoever happened to be listening, 'it's not his fault, he only does it because he needs the attention'.

Agnes would then ruffle Morachio's ears and say softly 'bad kitty' before returning to her spinning twirling knitted rainbow sculpture. Until late at night the house would be soothed by the steady clack clack clack of Agnes' knitting needles.

I imagine that you imagine Morachio to be a black cat, probably with yellow eyes, torn ears and a mellifluous meow. You would be correct regarding his eyes, ears and meow, but quite wrong about the colour of his fur. Morachio was a marmalade tortoiseshell spotted brown and white like a daddy longleg's legs (if you don't believe a daddy longlegs has spotted legs I suggest you take a long look at one before you file a complaint).

Florence, the middle child who looked a lot like everybody and like nobody in particular, was a wonderful chef. The smells of freshly baked bread, veal, bacon and mushroom lasagna, lamb and potato curry, extra fudgy chocolate cake, caramel slices and pounded goose pate, would waft out the windows and doors and bring hungry tears of delight to anyone who passed the cottage. The cupboards were mazes of dripping honeycomb, preserved peaches, cherries and wild strawberries. On the higher shelves jars of apricot jam, damson jam and marmalade, huge wheels of red waxed cheese, stout brown bottles of ginger beer and graceful pink bottles of elder flower champagne perched.

Often people would invite themselves to lunch or dinner and nobody seemed to mind, in fact it seemed to make everyone happier as Florence could try out new recipes.

People would wipe their feet on the straw mat, knitted by Agnes last Thursday and not yet destroyed by Morachio, and come in to dine at all times of day.

Florence had a bright yellow bird called Kali and a bright blue bird called Yohana. They would spend their days perched on the window ledge watching Florence cook and in the evenings would be locked away in a bright silver cage. Florence didn't like to lock up Kali and Yohana but if she didn't Kali and Yohana would get jealous. 'Jealous of what?' you may well ask. Jealous of the attention Agnes paid to her knitting. Kali and Yohana would perch on the ends of her knitting needles, pecking at the twine and twittering angrily. Poor Agnes.

Cinders spent most of her time outside. She wore a big floppy straw hat, a faded blue shirt and ragged trousers with many pockets. She kept many useful things in her pockets. She kept

string and nails, pieces of paper, old chewed on pencils, a red crayon, a blue crayon and a green crayon. She had secret treasure maps and pieces of old cheese, she had a screw driver and a pocket knife and an elastic band. She had a whistle and a tinkly bell and some carrot and lettuce seeds. Cinders was the sort of person who was prepared for anything, as long as the particular anything involved getting mucky and adventuring.

When Cinders wasn't adventuring she was helping around the house, generally she collected snails in the garden, cut the grass and chopped a lot of wood. Chopping wood was more important than you would expect as Florence used a lot of wood to heat her stove. Firewood was also used to heat the water in the house and if there was one thing the sisters had in common it was a love for long hot baths. When Cinders got into the water the bath would go a strange murky brown and when Cinders got out she would be a strange pink thing with pruney fingers and sun bleached blond hair. Cinders would look strangely vulnerable and small when the veil of soot and dirt was removed, but Cinders rarely stayed that way for long.

Cinders went on many adventures, very little was not an adventure around Cinders. Cinders' favourite adventure was sitting on the riverbank with Winstan the faithful rat. They would sit together, leaning against each other (although Cinders was careful to let Winstan do most of the leaning) and watch the water go by. Sometimes they would fall asleep, curled up among the leaves and sometimes they would dive into the water and splash around. That is to say Cinders would bound into the water and Winstan would pace the the river bank chattering anxiously. Winstan was a very faithful rat and longed to be beside her, but found the concept of bounding into water quite distressing and more than a little strange.

Winstan was a very handsome rat. He was black all over except for a milky white dot under his chin, a white bib on his chest and a white splotch on his front left paw. His whiskers were exceptionally long and delicate and belonged to a soft moist nose that would wriggle and twitch at the slightest provocation.

Winstan was a very wise rat and sometimes felt sad. The reason he felt sad was he knew he couldn't loll about and adventure with Cinders forever. One of the reasons was that he was a rat. Rats compared to people don't live very long. Although they don't live very long they spend a lot of time eating and sleeping and twitching their noses in the sunshine, so at least they spend their time well. Another reason Winstan would not be able to spend all his days

Cinders was that Winstan had noticed something, something that Cinders had not yet noticed. Cinders was growing up. In the world of fairy tales growing up means going out into the wide open world and getting married in order to live happily ever after. No one is quite sure what living happily ever after is, but everyone seems to be quite certain that growing up and living happily ever after excludes hanging out on a river bank with a faithful rat named Winstan. Cinders was not as silly as she looked and had noticed she was growing up, but thought if she pretended not to notice maybe it wouldn't notice her. The third reason Winstan and Cinders couldn't loll about on the river bank and have adventures forever is that forever is an awfully long time to do anything.

Growing up seems to be a thing that everybody notices. Agnes and Florence noticed that Cinders had grown up some time ago and were beginning to get a little concerned. One of the rules of fairytales is that the youngest sister marries well and lives happily ever after. The elder sisters are punished for being older and spend their days cleaning, cooking and sewing at the bottom of the castle.

Florence and Agnes cared deeply about Cinders and wanted her to live happily ever after, rather than wandering of having adventures all the time. They also wanted to fulfill their part of the bargain and be the older sisters who are condemned to working in the castle. They loved their little cottage by the woods, but the idea of living in a castle for a while was exciting. Florence dreamt about all the delicious pastries she would be forced to make and Agnes thought it would be nice to take a little holiday from knitting and try her hand at sewing.

Unfortunately for them Cinders was not the least bit interested in escaping their "oppressive" "yoke". The older sisters would make great preparations to go to a party and loudly forbid Cinders from going. They would even lock her in the cellar and pretended to forget she had a key. Then they would accidentally leave a gorgeous dress sprawled over a chair and a beautifully written invitation left nonchalantly on the table. The two elder sisters feeling a little bit silly in too much makeup and excessively flouncy clothes would flutter awkwardly at the party, waiting for a mysterious beauty to float into the room.

A mysterious beauty floated into the room once, but Agnes and Florence were terribly disappointed when she turned out to be some strange girl from out of town with a legume sensitivity.

Agnes and Florence would trudge home feeling more than a little depressed and find Cinders and Winstan asleep in the cellar curled up in a mound of goose feathers. Cinders and Winstan slept the deep and satisfying sleep of people who have been left unattended in a cellar full of cheese, salami, homemade raspberry cordial, dried apricots and sweet wrinkly apples. Locking Cinders in the attic didn't go any better, she would pad downstairs for some fresh bread and jam and spend the night watching birds that had nested in a tree outside and playing blindman's bluff with Winstan.

As time passed Agnes and Florence felt a steadily growing panic. The youngest getting married and living happily ever after was the way things were done. Agnes and Florence had a keen sense of social responsibility and felt a slight sense of failure in not driving Cinders out of home and into a happy ending. They knew they hadn't been very wicked older sisters, and wondered if they would be held accountable (although accountable to whom is a mystery). Agnes and Florence never mentioned this to Cinders, they felt too embarrassed and shy, having never been the youngest sister they didn't know how to explain the princes and the shoes (what other stories call birds and bees).

Desperate times call for desperate measures. The Godmother was called. The Godmother was a kick ass fairy who knew which side the stories were buttered on. She'd been whooping it up with her wand and magic mojo when the first ugly beast kissed the first princess. She could out dimple any five year old and her cheeks were rosier than Santa Claus.