

The Smallest Carbon Footprint in the Land

Once upon a royal vegetable garden, a slightly grubby prince was planting cabbage seedlings. He looked up to see the King and Queen standing on a mound of soil he had just weeded.

‘Errr hemm, Jamie, my boy ...’ the King began.

Prince Jamie felt annoyed with his parents for plodding their royal footwear through his newly-dug vegie patch.

‘Yes, Father?’ he said, trying to remain as calm and polite as possible, under such trying circumstances.

‘Your mother and I have been concerned about your behaviour lately,’ said the King.

Jamie wiped his brow with the moth-eaten sleeve of his jacket. He could not understand his parents. He used to be like all the other young princes he knew – sleeping in all day, partying at nightclubs and smashing the cameras of press photographers who annoyed him. But lately he had been going to bed at sunset, getting up at dawn and spending his days gardening. So what was wrong with that behaviour?

‘What your father is trying to say,’ the Queen interjected, ‘is that you have been spending far too much time grubbing around in the soil lately, instead of getting out and about and performing your royal duty.’

Now Jamie was even more perplexed. A few months ago the Queen had told him he was no longer required to give speeches for the openings of new schools, hospitals and bridges. This was because, since he had taken up gardening, he always looked so scruffy.



The King cleared his throat. ‘Herhem, what your mother is trying to say, my boy, is that it’s high time we had a royal grandchild. How will you ever find a princess to marry if you spend all your time in the palace vegetable garden?’

Jamie did not like the direction this conversation was taking. He had never met a princess who had the slightest interest in getting dirt under her manicured fingernails.

The Queen tightened the bow of her lips into a tight little smile. ‘So, Jamie, next month your father and I are going to host a gala ball in your honour. We shall invite every unmarried princess in the world, and a few carefully chosen noblemen to make up the numbers. And you are going to scrub up so well, my boy, that the eyes of every princess will be upon you. All you need do is pick one of them to be your wife.’

‘Princesses,’ Jamie groaned. ‘They spend their time nightclubbing, jetsetting, and buying new clothes and makeovers and bling. Every princess I have ever met has a carbon footprint the size of an international airport!’

The Queen’s glance dropped to her queen-sized court shoes and yo-yoed up again. ‘Harrumph, Jamie! All this gardening has turned you quite potty. Every princess I have ever met has dainty little feet.’

Jamie scratched behind his ear, wondering how best to explain the complexities of climate change. ‘But Mother, you don’t understand. A carbon footprint isn’t a ... um ... errr ... a *real* footprint. It’s more like ... more like an *idea* of a footprint.’

‘What Jamie is trying to say,’ said the King, ‘is that a carbon footprint is a measure of the carbon gases a person releases into the air. Most scientists agree that if we want to reduce the effects of climate change, my dear, we should reduce our carbon footprints.’

‘Bah!’ scoffed the Queen. ‘Scientists get paid to fix our climate problems. Your job, Jamie, is to find yourself a wife.’

The prince and his parents argued about who to invite to the ball. The King and Queen wanted to invite every princess in the world while Jamie wanted them to invite everybody in the land. In the end, his parents gave in. They were so keen for Jamie to find a wife, they didn’t care too much who he married – as long as he married **SOMEBODY**.

On the afternoon of the ball, Jamie shut the gate to his garden and plodded his muddy gumboots back to the palace. He kicked off his gumboots and tramped to his bathroom to scrub dirt and compost from his fingernails. Then he showered and changed into a splendid set of clothes which his parents had provided for the ball.

As he strode through the palace corridors, the King, the Queen and their courtiers agreed that Prince Jamie had scrubbed up very well indeed.

While the musicians were testing their microphones in the ballroom, Jamie wandered over to a balcony and stood looking down over the palace car park.

A stretch limousine had just pulled up. The doors opened and three glitzy young women stepped onto a red carpet which stretched up the stairs to the ballroom. More limos pulled up, and more dazzling young women emerged. Then the four-wheel drives arrived, conveying dozens of women, and a few men, to the ball.

Jamie hoped that one of his guests might cause his heart to flutter like the wings of the honey bees which spread pollen from flower to flower in his garden. But none of the guests he had seen so far had the slightest effect on his heart.

The next arrivals, however, caused him to wheeze, cough and splutter. A purple V8 roared into the palace car park, blowing oily smoke from its exhaust pipe. A woman driver wrenched on the handbrake, swung a doughnut and double-parked behind a stretch limo. Then the driver and two younger women stepped out of the V8, wearing fluoro-lime ball gowns and football boots.

‘Heads up, girls,’ the older woman urged. ‘Don’t slouch, Bertha. Suck in your tummy, Beulah. How do you expect to catch the eye of his Royal Highandmightiness if you look like sacks of potatoes? Now remember what I’ve been telling you, ducklings. It’s not a good idea to fart or burp when the prince is around – but if you can’t help it, make sure it’s a sneaker, so nobody will know it’s yours. And girls, there will be no punch-ups over who gets the first dance with his Royal Wealthiness.’ Then the three women lifted the hems of their skirts and charged towards the red carpet.



Jamie was about to sneak away to do some gardening by moonlight when four white horses trotted into the car park, pulling a gilded coach the shape of a pumpkin. A coachman jingled the reins and the horses stopped smartly and shook their manes. The coachman sprang down from the carriage and opened the coach door to a lovely young woman who was wearing a simple silk dress. She took his hand and stepped lightly to the ground, wearing what appeared to be a pair of glass slippers.

Jamie was so struck by this young woman's simple grace and style that he sprinted through the ballroom and slid down the bannisters of the marble staircase. Rushing up to his latest guest, he reached out his hand and introduced himself as Jamie.

'I'm Cindy.' The young woman grinned. 'Would you like to dance with me, Jamie?'

'Would I what?' cried the prince. He took Cindy's hand and they stepped onto the red carpet together. By the time they had reached the top of the stairs, he and Cindy were chatting and laughing like old friends.

As they entered the ballroom, the driver of the V8 pointed at Cindy and sneered, 'Bertha and Beulah, will you look at that little gold digger? It didn't take her long to hook onto his Right Royal Scruffiness.'

Jamie and Cindy headed for the other side of the ballroom, to get as far away from the fluoro gowns as possible.

'You're looking suddenly pale, Cindy,' Jamie remarked. 'What is the problem?'

'Well, I didn't expect to be dancing with *Prince* Jamie tonight,' she replied. 'And I resent those women calling me a gold digger. If I had known you were the prince I would never have asked you to dance.'

Embarrassed, Jamie shifted his weight from foot to foot. 'Cindy, um ... please don't hold it against me, being a prince and all that. I was born a prince. I had absolutely no say in it. And let me assure you that princes are people too.'

Cindy said she wouldn't care if he was a prince or pauper, she would like him just the same. 'We can choose our friends, Jamie, but not our families. Although I wouldn't mind trading my family for another.'

Jamie agreed. He wouldn't mind trading his family for another either.

The prince wanted to dance with Cindy all night but other women kept trying to cut in and dance with him. As the orchestra started up a polka, Beulah grabbed Bertha in a polka hold and the sisters cantered up to Cindy and the prince. Then Beulah cruelly stomped on one of Cindy's glass slippers.

'Oops, sorreeeee, you little gold digger,' Beulah sniggered. Then she and Bertha galloped back to the other side of the ballroom.

Outraged, the prince whisked Cindy off the dance floor and into a private room behind the orchestra. 'How dare that woman stomp



on you like that,' he exclaimed, bending down to examine her foot. 'She could have shattered your glass slipper and injured your foot.'

'Oh Jamie, please, don't fuss.' Cindy took off one of her slippers and handed it to him. 'My slipper is unbreakable. Look at it closely!'

Jamie held the slipper to the chandelier, admiring its crystal surfaces, and the way it flashed pink, red, yellow,

green, blue or purple, depending on the angle he held it.

Cindy explained that the slipper was not glass but diamond. 'As you probably know, diamond is one of the hardest substances in the world.'

Jamie began to wonder whether Cindy might be a princess. After all, what poor girl could afford diamond slippers? What poor girl would arrive at a ball in a gilded horse-drawn coach? He asked Cindy where the slippers had come from.

Cindy flashed a dazzling grin at him. 'The Fairy Godmother Op Shop, which is right next door to where I live. It's amazing what bargains you can find in op shops, Jamie.'

Jamie's eyes flickered with delight. 'Oh I do so love op shops. I buy all my gardening clothes from op shops. I find garments of the highest quality there. And at the same time I am giving money to charities which help people in need. And I can reduce my carbon footprint by not buying new clothes.' Jamie could not help smiling at Cindy, unable to believe his luck in meeting her at this ball. 'And speaking of carbon, do you realise that diamond is a form of carbon? But luckily, diamond is so hard that it is in no danger of breaking down into a gas and contributing to climate change.'

Cindy explained she was very interested in science. Whenever her stepmother and stepsisters drove off for a shopping spree, she would sneak next door to the Fairy Godmother Op Shop where she would sit for hours reading old science journals.

Clearly Cindy was an impressive young woman. Jamie wondered how anybody could even consider stomping on her foot. 'Cindy, just because your slippers are made of diamond, and not glass, does not excuse the behaviour of those dreadful women tonight. I will have them thrown out of the ball.'

Cindy sucked in a deep breath and then admitted that Beulah and Bertha were her stepsisters. 'My mother died when I was a baby. Then my father married Hortense, their mother. Poor Daddy died last year and ever since then, my stepmother and stepsisters have treated me like their slave, making me clean the house night and day. They think I'm home right now, scrubbing out the chimney with their shaggy old toothbrushes. Jamie, you have no idea what a scene those women will make if you have them thrown out of the ball. And if there is the slightest fuss they'll recognise me – it's a miracle they haven't recognised me already.'

'This is preposterous,' the prince declared. 'I cannot permit this sort of behaviour to continue. Don't you have any other relatives, Cindy?'

‘None that I know of. My only friend is Betty Fairweather, who operates the Fairy Godmother Op Shop. It was Betty who kitted me out for this ball.’

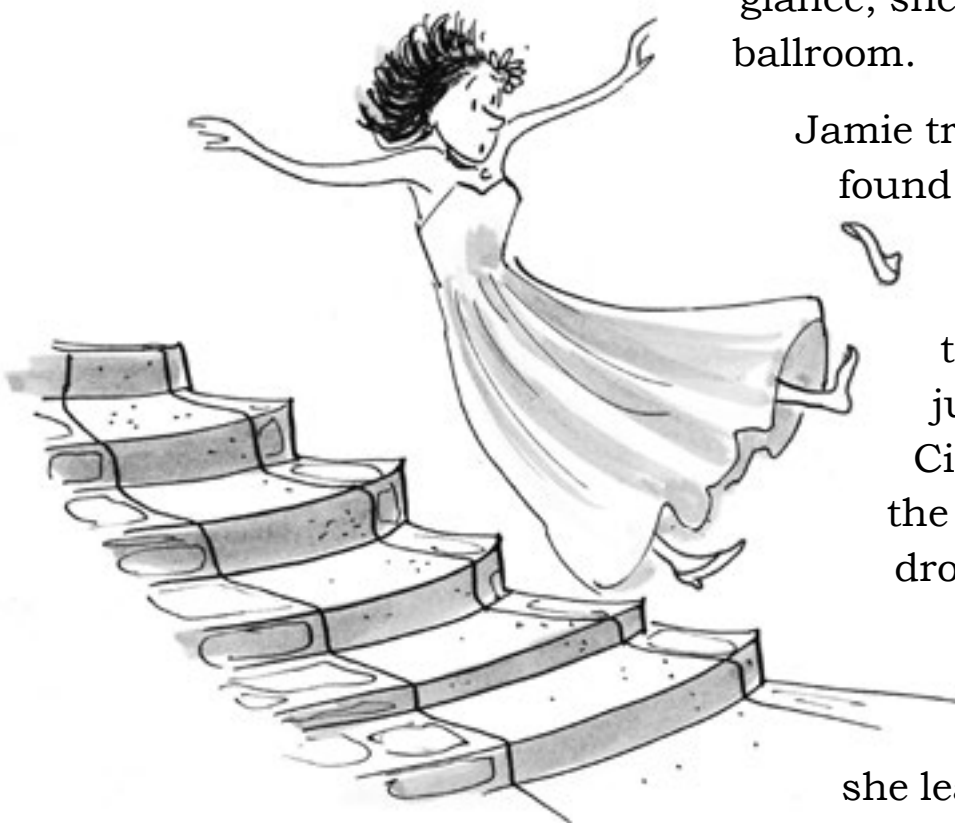
The prince raised an eyebrow. ‘Coach, coachman, horses and all?’

‘Oh yes, Betty recycles everything she can lay her hands on. Wood, glass, metal. Old cars and horse-drawn carts. You should see the back yard of her op shop. The coachman is an old friend of hers – he owns those gorgeous white horses. Oh, that reminds me; I promised Betty I would leave the ball before midnight tonight.’

‘We have three precious hours until then,’ the prince assured her. ‘Would you care for the next dance, Cindy?’

In the private room behind the orchestra, Jamie and Cindy were enjoying each other’s company so much that they scarcely noticed the hours passing. Until a palace clock struck twelve.

Cindy panicked. ‘I have to go, Jamie.’ And without a backward glance, she dashed through the ballroom.



Jamie tried to follow her, but found his way blocked by a mob of screaming fans. He darted towards the balcony, just in time to watch Cindy hurtling down the red carpet. She dropped a slipper on the bottom step but did not even stop to pick it up. Instead, she leapt inside the coach.

The coachman jingled the reins and the four white horses galloped away in the moonlight.

As the prince gazed down at the diamond slipper he was amazed to see it transforming into a tiny black footprint.

Instead of working in the garden the next morning, Jamie sat staring at the sooty smudge on the red carpet. Then he went inside the palace and told his parents he was going to travel throughout the land, seeking the young woman with the smallest carbon footprint. And then, he declared, he would ask her to be his bride.

So Jamie travelled throughout the land, knocking on every door. If there was an unmarried woman in the house, he asked her what she would do if she were to become his princess.

The eyes of the women lit up like disco balls. They claimed they would buy new clothes, new shoes, new jewellery, new hairstyles, new perfumes, new cars, new boats, and hire personal trainers. Then they would spend their time partying, holidaying, and jetsetting.

By the time the prince came to the second-last door in the land, he was beginning to despair that he would ever find Cindy again.

Hortense answered the door. ‘Oooh, good evening, your Charmingness,’ she gushed, trying to pat her frizzy hair into place. Then she turned and bellowed, ‘BEULAH, BERTHA, COME AT ONCE, MY DUCKLINGS, HIS ROYAL MONEYBAGS HAS ARRIVED!’

In their haste to get to the door, Bertha and Beulah tripped each other up and thumped to the floor in a tangle of arms and legs. Hortense plucked her daughters off the floor, stood them upright and dusted them down.

‘I have a question for Beulah and Bertha,’ said the prince.

‘Oh your Junior Majesty, we’ve already heard about your question,’

Bertha giggled.

‘People all over the land are talking about your question,’ said Beulah. ‘You’re asking every young woman what she would do if you married her. And whoever gives the best answer will be your bride.’

‘That’s not the question I was going to ask,’ the prince replied. ‘My question is *what have you done with Cindy?*’

The three women stared at each other in fake surprise. ‘*Cindy?*’

‘We’ve never heard of any person named *Cindy*,’ Beulah said.

‘*Cindy*. What a ridiculous name!’ Bertha snorted.

‘If I may be so bold as to ask, your Royal Jaminess,’ said Hortense, ‘who the hell is *Cindy?*’

‘As you well know, Hortense,’ said the prince, ‘she is the young lady whose foot Beulah stomped on at the Palace ball.’

‘That ghastly little gold digger!’ Hortense sniffed. ‘A regrettable accident, your Worship. Although she did have it coming, clinging to you all night, so my daughters had no chance of dancing with you. But I assure you, I have no little gold diggers living under my roof.’

Prince Jamie warned that he was going to visit the Fairy Godmother Op Shop next door, to talk to the manager. ‘But don’t be surprised if I come straight back.’

He found the door to the op shop locked – it was Sunday after all. But a middle-aged woman dressed in a fairy tutu rushed to open up for him. ‘Prince Jamie? I’m Betty Fairweather. I’d love to show you my range of gardening clothes, but I simply can’t hang around exchanging pleasantries. I’m worried about my young friend, Cindy. I haven’t seen her since the night of the ball. She dropped off the coach and gown just as her stepfamily pulled up next door in their purple V8. They must have caught Cindy trying to sneak back home. I’ll bet they have locked her in their cellar to teach her a lesson.’

The prince returned to Hortense's house accompanied by Betty, and demanded to see Hortense's cellar.

A look of horror spread across Hortense's face. 'Oh, not the cellar, your Soon-to-be Royal Majesty. I'm happy to show you any other part of my house, which is as clean and sparkling as a polished diamond. But not that dirty old cellar! Oh dear me, no! Our cleaning lady is fast asleep down there. She has been working so hard lately, poor darling, she deserves a little beauty sleep.'

'Hortense,' Betty said, 'if you don't show us your cellar, the prince will have you and your daughters arrested on suspicion of kidnapping Cindy.'

'Indeed,' said Jamie. 'I shall have the three of you sent to the Royal Prison, where you will be put in charge of making compost out of slops from the palace kitchen.'

'Your Grunginess, I beg you, anything but that!' shrieked Hortense. She took a key from her pocket and hurried downstairs, closely followed by Jamie and Betty.

Hortense unlocked the cellar door. And there was Cindy sitting on a patch of damp concrete, wearing an oversized fluoro-lime ball gown, her hair in ratty tangles.

'Jamie! Betty!' Cindy sobbed. 'Oh, I'm so glad to see you both. I was hoping one of you might rescue me.'

Betty picked up Cindy and gave her a fairy godmotherly hug. Then Jamie took Cindy's grimy hand and kissed it. 'I say, Cindy, would you be so awfully kind as to consider becoming my wife?'

Cindy thought about it for a moment, before replying, 'I don't think so, Jamie.'

Betty blinked in amazement. 'Cindy, what do you mean, you don't think so? Doesn't every poor girl dream of a fairy tale wedding?'

‘Not this one,’ said Cindy, somewhat embarrassed. ‘My dream has been to live happily ever after in a comfortable little cottage, with a kind, smart gardener for a husband. We could raise one or two children together, and a few chooks and goats as well. I’ve never wanted to live in a castle and spend my time being chased around by photographers and reporters.’

‘I could help you build a sunny, mud-brick cottage in the palace grounds,’ Betty offered. ‘We could use recycled materials in the cottage. I have some fabulous old doors and windows in the backyard of the Op Shop.’

‘Marry me, Cindy,’ said Prince Jamie, ‘and I’ll do my best to see that we both live happily ever after.’

