

Finding the Magic

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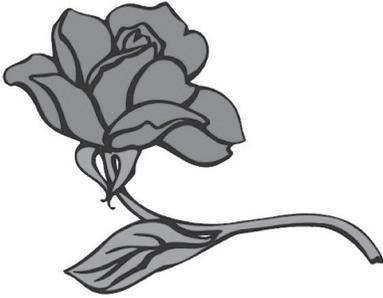
To my very special little friends:

It's because of you I've never stopped searching for magic

“In the beginning, Beauty was frightened of the Beast and shuddered at the sight of it. Then she found that, in spite of the monster’s awful head, her horror of it was gradually fading as time went by. She had one of the finest rooms in the Castle, and sat for hours, embroidering in front of the fire. And the Beast would sit, for hours on end, only a short distance away, silently gazing at her. Then it started to say a few kind words, till, in the end, Beauty was amazed to discover that she was actually enjoying its conversation. The days passed, and Beauty and the Beast became good friends.”

~From Beauty and the Beast (1740)

Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve



One

~1940~

Belle woke to the soft creaking of the house. She had grown up listening to creaks and groans, but these were new and foreign. She pulled her blanket down from over her head but kept her eyes closed as she listened. The cool air in the room nipped at her nose, but Belle didn't mind. She could still pretend, as long as she kept her eyes closed, that she was still in her apartment back home. She could pretend there wasn't a war and that she still lived a normal life where her mum made breakfast every morning while her dad dressed for work. She smiled and rolled over; the motion caused her to open her eyes.

She now faced a large window. The window reminded Belle she wasn't in the apartment with her parents, living in the middle of London. She'd been sent to the countryside, to hide from the German air raids. She had arrived the night before and had barely been able to make out the large, castle-like mansion she would be staying at until it was safe to return home to her mum.

If it were ever safe to return to her mum and *if* she had a home to return to. So many homes had already been bombed, so many parents already killed.

The bed Belle had fallen asleep in was larger than her little one at home. Her favorite book, a leather-bound edition

of *The Brothers Grimm Fairy Tales*, lay beside her with plenty of room to spare. At home, the book had to hide half under her pillow, but here it had part of the bed all to itself. Pushing herself up on one elbow, Belle opened the book and ran her fingers over the pressed rose which marked the story of *The Beauty and the Beast*. The story was her favorite. Her dad had gotten her the book not only because it held so many of their favorite fairy tales, but because it did contain the story of Beauty and the Beast. Few editions held it since it was a French story, not German. Both Belle and her dad had been as giddy as two kids when he'd found the book, and he had read the story to her every night before he'd left for war. The rose had been his final gift to her; he'd given her mum one just like it.

"Remember, Belle," he had said as he handed her the rose, "even though it doesn't seem like it right now there is still magic and beauty in the world. You sometimes have to look deeper to find it, like in the story. It isn't always right on the surface. Sometimes you have to look past the thorns to find the rose. But never stop looking because magic is always there. And if you forget to see magic, then the world becomes a very dark and sad place, and no one should have to live in a world like that. After all, that is why God gave us beauty in the first place."

It had been hard enough to find beauty when bombs fell from the sky and when Belle had to hide from them and listen to women and children as they sobbed around her. It was hard when reports and names came in of the soldiers who had died, and she and her mum waited with bated breath, afraid Belle's dad's name would be on the list. But, at least during those times, Belle had had her mum. Now she was alone in a strange place. Looking for magic would be harder here than when she'd had her mum to look with her.

“Help me to see the beauty in Your world and people, even here,” Belle prayed before she kicked the quilt off and jumped out of bed. If she was going to start looking she knew there was nothing to be gained by putting it off.

The mansion was large, and it took Belle a long walk up and down the halls and stairs before she found the kitchen. When she entered a plump, white-haired woman bent over the stove where she stirred a pot of porridge. She must have heard Belle’s quiet entry because she straightened up and adjusted her apron before she smiled.

“Well, good morning!” She wiped her hands on a cloth as she walked over and shook Belle’s hand before Belle could return her greeting. “Did you sleep well, dearie? I do hope so. I was going to show you to your room last night and make sure you were comfortable, but I wasn’t able to stay awake! Goodness, I do feel bad about it!” The woman shook her snowy head and clicked her tongue. “Chip told me this morning that Cogsworth saw to your needs last night, but goodness knows what he knows about a young lady’s needs! I hope you slept well in spite of that. My name is Mrs. Potts, by the way.”

Belle couldn’t help but giggle at the woman’s non-stop chatter and welcoming handshake.

“I didn’t mind at all being shown to my room by Cogsworth,” she said, glad to know the name of the round Frenchman who had greeted her at the door the night before and led her—silently—through the many halls to her room. “And yes, I did sleep well, thank you.”

“Good!” Mrs. Potts let go of her hand and spun back to the stove. “I imagine you’re hungry then. Sit down. Right there. I will get you breakfast.”

Sitting at the large table, Belle watched in wonder as the plump woman darted around and soon had two bowls

filled with steaming porridge. Belle assumed the second bowl was for Mrs. Potts, but she didn't sit, not even after she told Belle to eat.

Belle dipped her spoon into her hot breakfast and had time to take just one bite when the door which led outside opened and a young man walked in. He was tall and had the same bright eyes and jolly smile as Mrs. Potts. His arms were full of firewood, and he kicked the door closed with his foot before he dropped the wood into a box which sat near the blazing fireplace.

"It's going to be a blustery day, Mother dearest!" he announced as he kissed the top of Mrs. Potts' head. "I propose we stay inside and hide in the library with plenty of tea! Coffee is preferable of course, but I won't complain about that small detail."

"That is what you say, no matter the weather!" Mrs. Potts said. She hit him with her dishcloth. "Oh! You haven't met our guest! Belle Maurice, I'd like you to meet my son Philippe...though everyone here calls him Chip, so you may as well do the same. Chip, this is Mademoiselle Belle. She is going to be staying with us for a while." Mrs. Potts tossed the fifteen-year-old girl an encouraging smile.

"Oh, I already know she'll be staying!" Chip said. He sat down across from Belle and held out his hand.

His smile was so friendly Belle didn't feel any shyness as they shook hands. She had a feeling she and this boy would get along well.

"You're going to like it here," Chip said as he dug into his breakfast in the manner only boys are able. "And if you ever feel like you dislike it, I'll show you things which will make you change your mind. I know where all the gardens are. We'll get along fine, you and I. We're about the same age, I assume. It'll be fun to have someone young around

here. I get overwhelmed by the number of ... its...they have me outnumbered. Two to four isn't much better, but we can make do, can't we? You won't mind being friends with a Frenchman, right? I was born and raised in England, even if you can't tell from my accent. But it doesn't make a difference to you, right? England and France might be on shaky ground right now, but you and I don't have to be."

Belle had to cover her mouth with both hands as she laughed. She nodded since Chip didn't slow down long enough to give her a chance to answer.

"I won't mind at all," she said when Chip stopped to breathe.

"Good, because we are all French here," Mrs. Potts joined in. "Even our dear master. So you will hear plenty of French accents, but if you don't mind ours, then we won't mind yours. Now eat your breakfast before it gets cold; I must take the master his and make sure Lumiere and Cogsworth aren't still fighting."

When they had finished breakfast, Chip showed Belle all over the mansion. He tried to explain where all the halls led to, but there were so many, Belle couldn't remember any better than when Cogsworth had taken her up and down them the night before. She didn't want to tell Chip this, though, since he was so nice about it. She smiled and nodded and continued to follow him.

The halls were lined with mysterious doors, all of which were closed. Chip opened some of them and let her look inside, but most of the others, he said, were bedrooms and storage rooms and were filled with dust more than anything else.

"Mother said there used to be guests here all the time when Mr. Prince's—his first name is Adam, but I don't know if that matters to you—when his parents first moved

to England. There were constant parties and balls, even when they died, and Mr. Prince became heir of the mansion and surrounding grounds. But something happened soon after I was born... I don't know what because no one will tell me. All I know is that it was bad, and Mr. Prince fired all the other servants but Mother, Cogsworth, and Lumiere, the only French servants working for him. He closed up all the rooms except for a select few and keeps mostly now to his bedroom, one drawing room, and the smaller dining room. He doesn't care much what the rest of us do now, so long as we leave him alone most of the day and keep the mansion from falling down on his head. We all eat dinner together and spend evenings in the drawing room. That is the only time we ever see Mr. Prince...except for Mother. She takes him his meals and cleans his rooms."

Belle's eyes widened at this description. Her new guardian sounded like someone from her book; withdrawn and mysterious. She wasn't sure if she were suddenly interested in learning more about Mr. Prince or frightened of him. She was thankful to have Chip at her side, so she wouldn't have to be alone in the mansion, which now felt dark, damp, and cold.

What if Mr. Prince turned out to be like the dreaded Bluebeard and brought girls to his mansion only to kill them in a cellar? Belle thought with a shudder. She moved closer to Chip but tried not to look like frightened. She didn't want to tell Chip about her overactive imagination and the frights it sometimes gave her.

"You will have to join us in the evenings, but it won't be as bad as I might have made it sound," Chip continued. The halls were dim. There were windows at intervals, but most of them were covered in dust, and little light came through.

"I like to read," Chip said. "There's a library I will show

you. But if you don't like to read, I'll play chess with you, or you can sit and embroider like Mother does. Cogsworth works on his cloaks, and you might be able to help him if you're quiet and extremely careful. Lumiere always has a new endeavor he fiddles with, he'd be more willing than Cogsworth to let you help. Mr. Prince does nothing but sit in a dark corner and watch us. It will be hard for you to get used to at first, I'm sure, but I don't think he means anything by it and you just have to pretend he isn't there and not say a word to him."

Belle nodded because she couldn't get her dry tongue to make any sounds. Maybe Mr. Prince didn't sound like Bluebeard, who had been friendly when his wives first came to live in his castle, but that didn't make her feel any better. She already dreaded dinner and the evening that had to follow.

The weather outside was bitter, just as Chip had said when he brought the wood inside. He took Belle out to show her the stable—in which only one horse lived—and then they spent the rest of the day inside. Belle didn't forget about dinner, but there were moments when she didn't dread it as much, and when the time came Chip promised she could sit beside him.

They entered the small dining room together. A fire blazed in the fireplace, and the table was set with simple white china. Just after Chip and Belle entered, a door on the other side of the room opened and a tall, handsome man sporting a thin mustache entered. He carried a silver tray covered with a lid. He let the door swing closed, set the tray on the table, and turned back to the kitchen when Chip stopped him.

"Lumiere! You haven't met Belle yet!"

Lumiere pivoted and glided across the room in the time

it took Belle to blink. Smiling, he took her hand in his and kissed her fingers.

"So you are Mademoiselle Belle Maurice!" he said, his French accent thicker than Mrs. Potts or Chip's. "It is a pleasure to have you here! It has been far too long since this house was graced with such a charming and lovely face."

Belle blushed, Chip laughed, and someone snorted. Cogsworth had joined them. He shook his head at Lumiere.

"Lumiere, your constant sweet talk makes me sick," he said. He walked over and peeped under the lid to see what lay on the tray.

"I'm telling Mrs. Potts you were poking at dinner before the master has joined us...again," Lumiere replied.

"You are too old to tattle!" Cogsworth said.

"You're too old to try and sneak pieces of duck before everyone is sitting down," Lumiere retorted.

"And you are both too old to be bickering like children," Mrs. Potts said when she entered. She carried a basket covered with a cloth. The smell of hot bread drifted out from under the cloth.

"He started it!" Lumiere said. He straightened up and clasped his hands behind his back while he sneaked a wink at Belle.

Belle smiled, but stopped the moment another door opened, and a man entered. All the joviality slipped out of the room and Chip stepped closer to Belle in a protective manner as she tried hard not to stare at the man. He sat down at the head of the table without acknowledging anyone.

He was a stern man, his hair gray, stiff, and wild; it gave him the appearance of some kind of beast. His eyes, when he raised them long enough for Belle to see, were almost as wild as his hair and bloodshot. He sat with his shoulders

stooped, his lower jaw jutting out, and a scowl set so deeply on his face Belle wanted to run from the room.

“Sit,” he said in a voice so deep and rumbling Belle jumped.

Everyone quickly and quietly obeyed, taking places around the table. Belle made sure to sit between Mrs. Potts and Chip. It made her feel safe.

Once seated, dishes of food were passed around and everyone filled their plates and ate without a word. Belle kept her eyes fixed on her duck. She tried to force the meat past the lump in her throat. Never in her life had she experienced a meal like this one. All the ones at home were filled with laughter and conversation.

When the meal was finished Belle eagerly volunteered to help Mrs. Potts clear the table as the men left for the drawing room. When they were done, she hoped she might be able to make a hasty retreat to her room, but before she had the chance to make her request, Mrs. Potts led her out of the dining room, down a hall, and into a dimly lit room. A fire burned, and candles sat on various tables. Everyone was already engaged in the activities Chip said they would be. Cogsworth had all his concentration locked on a clock and didn't look up when Mrs. Potts and Belle entered. Lumiere polished a candelabra, but he stopped long enough to smile and wink at Belle. Mr. Prince only frowned.

Shrinking, Belle scuttled over to sit beside Chip who made room for her on the bench he had claimed near the fire. He held a book and moved another, so she could sit beside him.

“I didn't know which kinds you liked, so I just grabbed one. It's *Emma*, by Jane Austen. I thought it might be the kind of book a girl would like.”

Belle returned his smile and did her best to ignore Mr.

Prince's eyes, which she could feel boring into her. It wasn't easy to hide behind her book. She kept peeping over the top, in the hopes Mr. Prince would have found someone else to glare at, but his eyes were always fixed on her. She wondered what she might have done to make him so angry. Was he upset she had come to live in his home? She wasn't sure he had invited her there, or if his name had been mentioned like so many others, because he owned a place outside of London. She knew of many other children who had gone to live in the country since it was safer than staying near the bombs.

The longer the night progressed, the more Belle felt uncomfortable and out of place. She was ready to run from the room when Mr. Prince stood, grunted something which might have been "good night," and left. Belle had never felt a stronger surge of relief and gladly followed Mrs. Potts back to her own room where she closed the door and threw herself down on the bed.

Mrs. Potts had left a candle for Belle. It sat on the nightstand by the bed and burned cheerfully, but to Belle, all it did was make the surrounding shadows bigger. They reached out for her, long fingers groping to pull her into their depths. Belle suddenly felt alone, more than she had ever been in her life. Her thoughts turned to her mum and dad, and she squeezed her eyes closed as tears burned them.

"I want to go home," she whispered.

The lump in her throat grew, and the tears escaped. Belle buried her head in her pillow and sobbed.