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Opening Extract from...

A Different Reflection

Written by Jane L Gibson

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A Different Reflection

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Jane L. Gibson



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For Thomas and Ryan
Always believe that you can achieve anything, follow your dreams and make your wishes come true!

Introduction

My journey to work most mornings on the London tube can be somewhat busy, rushed and hot. I am however distracted from the bustling stations by the many posters showing the new, upcoming and already running shows on at the West End. They help me recall my childhood, and in particular that clever way in which a child's mind can create a whole other world of fantasy from a well-told story. My mother always made sure that she read a fairy tale to me every bedtime, or when I was sick. I found that I had the ability, like most children, of having a very creative imagination, enabling me to conjure up the most vivid images of the wicked witch, the fairy godmother, the damsel in distress and of course the well-documented Prince Charming. I am sure that even today there is not a little girl under the age of ten who would not want to be carried away on horseback by Prince Charming, in a wonderful land filled with romance and magic.

I had the understanding that fairy tales were something that we accepted in our childhood as make-believe. I have however come to realise that magic and fairy tales do indeed exist, and I can confirm this as I have experienced it first-hand. Maybe after reading my story you may find a spark of belief lost in our adulthood; that out there, in our

ever-evolving world, there can be the magic and excitement that we experienced as a child, and you can believe in the reality that fairy tales do indeed still occur to this day.

Chapter One

My usual Monday morning trip to work consisted of a very crowded tube ride eight stations long, then a ten-minute walk to my office. I had a very fulfilling job as a journalist and writer for a well-known magazine, which enabled me to interview interesting people and travel a little. This pleased me, as I would never choose to be stuck behind a desk on a full-time basis. During my time as a journalist for my current employer, I met my fiancé, Mr John Cardel, a very successful businessman that I had interviewed some eighteen months ago. It was slightly surprising when he proposed so soon, but we had been engaged now for about ten months, and as our lives were very busy, due to our professional schedules, I could not see us marrying in the very near future. A long engagement was our plan; we had no reason to rush into becoming husband and wife. Just being together was enough for us, for now.

John could be very trying sometimes; his job was stressful and he tended to have a short fuse, which was completely the opposite of myself – calm, relaxed and content (most of the time) – but we seemed to be happy with our situation. We did have slight disagreements, however, on where we should live once married. I did

not want to be held ransom to the confines of London city centre living; as much as I loved London, working here was enough for me. John would be happy to have the largest state-of-the-art apartment overlooking the city, but – call me old-fashioned or romantic – I would prefer an old, large house that had been lived in, with a garden and definitely not within a stone's throw of London city centre, but hopefully within commuting distance! Wishful thinking – the cost for property here was phenomenal.

Monday was fairly uneventful, and on the way home I stopped at the newsagents to buy my favourite magazine (other than the one that I worked for, of course) and a lottery ticket. It was always nice to dream of what we would like to buy in the fortunate circumstance of winning. There would be no John for dinner tonight; he had a business meeting over dinner and a late return home planned, and to be honest I am glad of the respite from niceties. Work had thrown a new challenge at me – finding unusual, heart-warming stories that were true. In London, there should be plenty – but whether they were true or not was another matter! I wanted to explore something different, not the usual recovery after illness (which by definition is still remarkable), or the winner of the lottery, or successful businessperson that came from nowhere. I wanted something that would be inspiring and a change from the everyday, miraculous, feel-good stories. So I intended to do some research at home, with a glass of wine in hand.

When I arrived at work the next morning, we had a general meeting on which items were prioritised for the

next month's issue. I knew I had six weeks maximum to get this new feature underway, so research was my main priority at the moment, but after a couple of hours on Google last night, it was not looking very promising.

"So Kat, any luck with your research? I know that this has just been handed to you, but any thoughts?" my editor called across the conference table.

To make you aware, all of my friends, family and colleagues – even John – called me Kat, short for Katharina. Long story, but my mother used to love the names of princesses from any country – usually ones that were significant in fairy tales – so I inherited a couple of them! It didn't really bother me that they shortened my given name – it was after all a mouthful and slightly old-fashioned – but I did like my name, even though I didn't hear it very often.

"Not yet Angela, but I am going to sink my teeth into it and hope I have something for you within the next week or two!" I confidently replied. I certainly wasn't one to back down from a challenge or new venture.

"Great, well keep digging – there has to be something different out there worth writing about!" she calmly concluded as the meeting came to an end.

I walked back to my desk and slumped into my chair as a coffee appeared in front of me. "Hey, want to talk about it?" Claire, my lovely assistant and friend (whom unfortunately I share with two other journalists), asked me.

"No, it's fine Claire. Starting a new project is always a little frustrating until a spark of inspiration starts bubbling!" I replied.

"Well, you always come up with something amazing, so I'm not worried!" she stated as she sipped her coffee.

"Thanks, I'm just a little tired. John came home at one in the morning and I didn't go to bed until eleven, he woke me up and I couldn't sleep! Tuesday morning blues, that's all it is!" I laughed after yawning, then took a large gulp of my strong coffee.

Claire placed a hand on my shoulder and muttered, "I bet he woke you up!" She laughed and winked at me, then went back to her desk.

I shook my head at her, smiled and then turned my computer back on. One thing that we did have here was a wealth of knowledge on our database, so I was going to continue my research. Claire had already returned with piles of things to plough through, and so for the next four days I tried to pick up on something that I could expand on, and turn into the story it ought to be. By the time Friday arrived, I was glad it was the weekend. Even though I had a list of possibilities, nothing was particularly inspiring me at this point, which was extremely frustrating.

John and I were meeting with friends of his for dinner tonight, and I welcomed the fact that I need not cook. However, the company we were holding was not the most stimulating at times – Charles and Helen are nice enough, but so very straight-laced. It's a hard task to sit smiling continually whilst wanting to fall asleep during conversation, but Charles and John are work colleagues and enjoy each other's company. Helen is a full-time mum, and although one day I would love to have children, I do not find a whole evening's conversation regarding their child's first potty success, snotty-nosed

cold or small achievement at playgroup the most stimulating conversation, or the most exciting way to spend a Friday night.

Tonight, though, I found myself interested in one thing that Charles had to say. John asked him:

"So, how is the house hunting going?"

"Oh, don't ask. It is not as easy as I expected it to be!" Charles replied.

"I didn't know that you were planning on moving home!" I stated with surprise.

"Well we want a garden for the children, and plenty of space, including a spare room for guests to stay. It's not as easy as you might imagine near London!" Helen confirmed. "Oh Charles, tell them about the house we went to see on Wednesday!" She then excitedly said, "It was so strange!"

"How so?" I asked curiously. And so my intrigue began.

"God yes, it was so strange. A beautiful old stately-looking home, with about eight acres of land, ten bedrooms – a little bit run-down, but doable if the price was right! In fact, that's what attracted us in the first place – the price seemed lower than it should be, which made me think that something must be wrong with it. Anyway, we pulled up outside after driving up the long driveway and we both said 'Wow'. On first impression; it was amazing! Definitely old – it must have been over two hundred years – but amazing to look at!" he said, with slight disappointment.

"Well it sounds perfect Charles. You can afford it anyway!" John then said as he sat back in his chair.

"Ah, but wait!" Charles then replied. I waited in

anticipation. "We went up the elaborate front steps to meet the agent and entered the main door. Jesus, John, it was like walking back in time; marble floors, marble stairs, chandeliers, old portraits and furniture and lots of mirrors. It was a little creepy, if I'm being honest, but with an open mind we followed along and looked around and then, bam, there it was – the problem!" he finished as he punched his own hand.

"What?" John asked inquisitively.

"A clause in the deeds and ownership of the house – named George!" Charles finished. John looked at them, then at me, then back at Charles.

"George?" John asked. "Who for the love of God is George?" Charles laughed.

"George is the old butler of the house, I think. He has been granted the right to live in the house and to have the freedom to roam within it until he should so depart this world! The original owners signed rights of the property over to him with the clause that he can stay there! Oh, and get this – there is nothing that can be done about it!" he finished.

"But surely if the house is empty, he would not want to stay there any longer – particularly if he's not working there. God, how old is he?" I asked.

"I wouldn't like to put an age on him! Trust me, we asked all of the questions, Kat, but believe me when I say that old George is a spritely chap and doesn't look like he is going anywhere anytime soon! He lives in an apartment attached to the place. He said that, as he feels that he lives there, it is his duty to continue the upkeep as much as he is able, but he chooses to stay there because

– and these were his words – 'How can one leave a place that they have been all their life, with people they love, with memories they treasure, in a place that they call home?' God, it was like something from a movie!" Charles took a swig of his wine.

"The sad thing is, as much as George seems like a nice man, how can we possibly live there with the children? He's a stranger and he's entitled to roam around anywhere he should choose! It's very strange; I think that they will struggle to sell or rent it at all," Helen confirmed.

"I'm sorry, I can't understand why, if he is so happy there and has the right to live there, he is trying to sell it, or rent it, or whatever he intends to do?" I asked.

"Well, that's the other thing. It is marketed on the low side, but the purchase is leasehold for ninety-nine years, so it goes back to George's family eventually anyway!" Charles took another gulp of his wine. "I cannot think of anything worse – spending a large amount of money and then having to share the house with someone else, with stipulations on renovation because George likes it the way it is. I think he needs the cash to look after it and he's probably a lonely old fool! We walked away confused at the situation, but decided that it was not for us!" Charles finished.

"Well, sounds too complicated to me. I say good riddance and keep looking!" John answered.

I sat for a while contemplating the whole story. The more I thought about it, the more I found it a touching story, and I wanted to find out more. Whilst John and Charles moved their conversation to sport, I looked to Helen and leaned across the table to speak in a quieter voice.

"Helen, do you think that you could let me have the name of the property agent marketing this strange house? I'm doing a new feature for the magazine and I think that this could have the grounds for a good story!" I smiled at her.

"Oh sure," she replied as she dipped into her purse for a pen and paper. "In fact, I think that I have one of his business cards in here. I will write the name of the house on the back!" she excitedly chirped as she pulled a purple card from her purse and scribbled 'Northfield' on the back. As she passed the card to me, I had a good feeling about it, and looked at the name she had so neatly written. "Ooh, how exciting. Wouldn't it be great if you did write a story on this? I definitely think there is a story there!" she stated, then leaned closer and whispered, "I actually think that I felt sorry for George, but don't tell Charles. He just looked so lonely." I nodded in reply and placed the card carefully into my bag. I felt as though I should treat it with respect; it could be my next – no, *the* next big story for the magazine. It would be my first line of enquiry on Monday morning.

The weekend passed relatively insignificantly; it was nice to chill a little bit, with no pressure. John had to work from home on Sunday; when I awoke, I found him already hard at work. When we decided to take a stroll around Regent's Park in the early evening, I was glad of the fresh air. We dined and shared wine at The Open Air Theatre, which was showing the re-imagined play of *The Winter's Tale*, which John had purchased tickets for, as he knew my love of stories – particularly ones involving princesses! When we arrived home I felt perfectly content with the evening, and ready for my week at work.

When Monday morning arrived, I was quick to call the property agents from the card that Helen had passed to me. Mr Justin Temperley of Madison Cleaver; it sounded very exclusive indeed. I punched the number into my phone and when the receptionist answered I asked for him. She in turn wished to know what my call was regarding, and when I mentioned Northfield, she almost sounded surprised that I had said the word. After holding for only a few seconds a young, enthusiastic male answered.

"Hello, Justin Temperley speaking, how may I help you?" he politely asked.

"Hello, Katharina Stuart from *Resolute* magazine," I replied.

"Oh, hello Katharina, how can I help you?" he asked again, with surprise in his voice.

"I was calling about a property you are agents for, and was recently told about – Northfield? My friends recently went to view it. I am doing an article for the magazine about unusual true stories and I am led to believe there is an old butler that still resides there. I would really like to meet him; if he is in agreement, I would like to do a piece on him!" I replied.

"Ah!" Justin answered, sounding disappointed that I was not a prospective buyer. "And what exactly is it that you require from me?" he then asked.

"Well, actually Justin, I wondered if you could put me in touch with him, or take me there to meet him? If anything, the piece may rouse some interest from potential and possible buyers," I then stated, sounding very sure. There was silence for a few seconds and I sat

with my eyes closed and fingers crossed, hoping to hear the words that I needed to hear.

"Very well Miss Stuart, I will give Mr Grey a call and see what he says. Is this the best number to get you on?" he asked. I punched the air in excitement.

"Yes, absolutely. Thank you so much, Justin. I look forward to speaking with you soon," I replied.

"I will call you as soon as I have been in touch with him," he then said.

"Claire!" I called as I hung up. "I think that I may have that story!" I happily announced. She came bouncing across to my desk to find out the details.

"Brilliant, what is it, can you tell me?" she curiously asked. I sat with her and briefly explained the situation. "Poor old chap, rattling around there; I bet he is really lonely. I do think it will be interesting, though; I bet he has some real tales to tell from working there! So what do you need from me?" she then asked.

"I need as much information as you can find on Northfield. How old it is, who built it, who has lived there, what happened to previous owners, and any exciting events that have taken place there!"

In the meantime, I started to do some research of my own on the building itself. From plans, it did look spectacular; as I became engrossed in the information I was gathering, I was taken by surprise when my phone rang. It was Mr Justin Temperley.

"Katharina, hello there, it's Justin from Madison Cleaver!" he stated.

"Yes, hello Justin, I'm hoping that this is good news?" I winced as I crossed my fingers again.

"Well, it took a bit of persuading, but he is happy to see you. He has insisted though that it must be at two o'clock on Wednesday."

"Fantastic. Thank you for your help, Justin. Should a story be printed from the outcome of this meeting with Mr Grey, I will be sure to mention you in the piece," I replied as I stood with excitement.

"I should hope so!" he said with sarcasm. "Good luck with him. I will say that he isn't the most forthcoming of gentlemen!" Justin then finished, before ringing off.

"Yes!" I happily exclaimed as I walked to get another coffee. I passed Claire's desk. "Book me out for the afternoon on Wednesday, I have a meeting in place!" I informed her.

She smiled. "I told you not to worry!" she said confidently as she tapped away on her computer.

Tuesday was spent researching and doing more researching. The more I looked back at the history of Northfield, the more captivating it became. There were pictures and drawings of the building itself dating back to over two hundred years before, including plans of the house and gardens. Unfortunately there was not very much to find on the people who had lived there or anything that had taken place there. It was fast becoming a fascination; surely there must be something in its long history to uncover? However, it was quickly becoming apparent that we did not know how old this house actually was – definitely a question for George who, after working there, would hopefully have some knowledge of its past. I had a fairly good feeling about this and couldn't wait for tomorrow. Roll on Wednesday.