

The Charm of Imagination

I'm startled awake by the sound of something falling. Not a crash, more like something being set down really hard on the floor or a table. I sit up quickly and glance around my room. Everything seems normal. My textbooks are still neatly stacked on my desk, nothing looks to have fallen on the floor, and everything is quiet. I sit in silence for a moment to see if the sound will come again. When it doesn't, I tell myself it must have been the people above me or next door. My dorm room's walls were so thin you could hear every little thing.

I turn back to my laptop and check the time. Nearly 8 p.m. I hadn't meant to fall asleep. In fact, I wanted to do anything but that. My English assignment is due in less than twelve hours and I don't have time to waste. It's my first assignment for this class and I thought it would be easy.

The only thing I have to do is write a story that doesn't take place in the real world.

I sigh and shake my head at the still blank document, which seems to be taunting me from my laptop screen. I'd spent nearly two hours sitting in complete silence with no distractions trying to come up with something to write about and I still had nothing. After almost two semesters of college and writing dozens of essays and research papers, a simple work of fiction should be easy. I mean, the assignment only calls for a thousand words.

I stand up and stretch and that's when I hear it. It's not the thump I'd heard before. This time it's music and it seems to be coming from my closet.

I quickly make my way toward the closed closet door, wondering why music would be coming from the other side. I open the door and glance around, trying to think of what could be making music amongst the color coordinated outfits and shoes and come up with nothing. I listen again to be sure what I'm hearing is real. Sure enough, the sound seems to be coming from among my shoes lined neatly on the floor. I kneel down, trying to follow the sound more closely. Then I see it. In the far left corner next to a pair of sandals sits a box. I move further into the closet and reach for it. As I lift it off the floor and out into the brightness of my room, I can see that it's decorated with flowers that have been carved into all four sides. On top sits a bright pink star. It's one of those musical jewelry boxes that you wind up and it plays a song. I stare at it for a long time. I don't remember this being in my closet, in fact I don't remember owning one of these at all.

I lift the lid of the box and a small circular mirror gives me a glimpse of my reflection. I'm startled at how tired I look. I quickly look away from the mirror see what's inside the box. Tucked inside is a silver charm bracelet. I lift it gently out, to get a better look. There are three charms attached to it, a rose, an ice cream cone, and a rectangular charm that resembles a book. Just like the jewelry box, I don't recognize the bracelet.

As I'm examining the bracelet and pondering where it and the box came from, the music begins to grow louder and all of a sudden, a bright yellow glow fills the inside of the box. Each charm on the bracelet begins to light up with a different colored spark. The light is blinding and instinctively I shield my eyes. By now the music is deafening and through the spaces between my fingers, I can see the star spinning wildly. I drop the bracelet from my hand and slowly the star stops spinning and the box goes dark again. Everything is quiet. I sit on the floor stunned, not sure if what just happened really happened. How could it have happened? I don't know where this box even came from. I try to rationalize with myself, telling myself I've been staring at my computer screen too long and now I'm hallucinating. I carefully pick up the bracelet again,

holding between two fingers. For a few moments nothing happens and I just stare at it, then the charm that looks like a book begins to light up. I carefully break it closer quite get a better look. I realize it is a book that opens and closes. It's open and I can just barely see a field of tall trees. There not like any trees I've ever seen. Their leaves are all different shapes and colors and each one has a different pattern.

"Well, are you coming or not?"

I whip around to see where the voice came from.

"Who's there?"

"It's me."

"Me who?"

"Look, in the mirror."

I turn towards the tiny mirror in the jewelry box. Instead of my own reflection, there's a little girl. Her long dark hair is pulled back in two braids held together with tiny purple ribbons.

I fight the urge to scream, while my brain goes through all the possibilities of how this could be happening.

"You're not real," I say more to myself than to the girl.

I reach over to the box and try to close it, but no matter how hard I push the lid, it stays open and the girl remains.

"Listen, I don't know what kind of prank this is, but I don't have time for this. I have a story to finish."

"I like stories. What's it about? Can you read it to me?"

"No."

"Why?" She starts to pout.

"One, because you're not real. Two, because it's not finished."

"I am real. I'm talking to you aren't I."

"Yes, but there has to be a logical explanation for this."

"There is an explanation. Do you want to know what it is?"

"I'd love to."

"Well, I was sent by the land of Imaginaria to help you."

"The what?"

"The land of Imaginaria," She pronounces it slowly as if I'm the child.

"Okay, seriously how and why are you here?"

"I told you. I was sent by the land of Imaginaria to help you?"

"Help me with what?"

"I don't know,"

"So, you were sent here to help me, but you don't know what you're here to help me with,"

"Exactly,"

I close my eyes and take a few deep breaths, trying not to yell at the little girl who I don't even know. Then I ask myself why I'm trying to protect the feelings of someone that's not even real.

"So can I help you?"

"I don't need help with anything."

"Yes you do. If you didn't I wouldn't be here,"

"Can you help me write this story?"

"Sure,"

I laugh.

"What are you going to do, cast a magic spell and write my essay for me."

"No, but I can help you write it,."

"How do you plan to do that?"

"The bracelet,"

I look at the bracelet I'm still holding between my fingers.

"How is this going to help me?"

"Put it on,"

I give her a skeptical look.

"What's going to happen?"

"Just try it."

"Tell me what's going to happen first,"

"I'll be able to help you with your essay."

"No, I'm not falling for it."

I drop the bracelet and stand up.

"Wait, where are you going?"

I head toward the box again and I'm just about to shove the box back into the closet when I catch a glimpse of the little girl in the mirror. Her eyes are filled with tears.

"Please, put on the bracelet. I really want to help you,"

I sigh and go back to the bracelet. I place it in the palm of my hand and stare at it for a moment.

I glance up at the clock. My essay is due at 8:00 addm. It's 9:45. What could possibly go wrong.

It's probably just a prank and nothing will happen, besides this bracelet turning my arm green and the little girl in the mirror being some elaborate trick with a camera.

"Fine," I say unclasping the bracelet and slipping it on my wrist.

The jewelry box starts to glow again and the music starts playing. The little girl in the mirror is smiling at me as the bracelet starts to sparkle.

Before I know it, I'm being lifted off the ground by an invisible force. The force pushes me toward the mirror and before I know it, I'm being sucked inside. It feels like I'm being sucked through a vacuum and the only thing I can see are the colorful lights. The music, which I now realize is to the tune of Twinkle Twinkle, is the only sound. This lasts for a while and then I'm dropped onto my feet. Everything goes quiet, except for the sound of birds chirping. I open my eyes and am immediately greeted by a bright pink sun. I glance around wildly, suddenly confused and terrified. I'm surrounded by tall patterned trees with vibrant colored leaves ranging from bright red to golden. I realize it's the same seen from inside the tiny book charm.

"Where am I?" I say out loud.

"You're in the land of imaginaria."

I whirl around and come face to face with the little girl from the mirror. She's wearing a long white dress dotted with small golden stars that match the one on top of the jewelry box.

"You made it!" she says jumping up and down.

"Where exactly did I make it too and how did I get here,"

"Like I said, this is the land of Imaginaria and you got here with the magic in the bracelet."

"Can the magic take me home? I have a story to write."

"That's why you're here. That's what you needed help with right."

"Yeah well, forget it. I need to get home if I'm going to finish."

"You can't go home until you find a way to write your story and I earn my charm for helping,"

"Wait a minute, who are you?"

"It's me, Princess Elodie Analia of Imaginaria. But don't call me that. Call me Elle. You don't remember me?"

The name sort of rings a bell and I stare at Elodie for a moment. Then it hits me.

Until I was around ten, I had an imaginary friend. Her name was Princess Elodie. We'd talk and play games and for most of my childhood, she was my closest companion. That was until my parents and teachers started telling me I needed to make real friends and stop talking to myself.

"How is this possible? Where am I? You're not real. I have to get home."

"I'm not going to tell you again. Also, I am real. I'm standing right in front of you aren't I?"

"You're not serious. This is all some kind of twisted dream isn't it?" I say.

"Nope, you received the treasure box of imagination and the only reason you would receive it is if you really needed it," Elle explains.

"Needed it? What do you mean I needed it? I'm almost eighteen. What would I need with a treasure box of imagination?"

"Why are you asking me? You're the one who received the box. I'm just here to assist you on your journey."

"My journey. Oh so now I have to go on a journey. The only journey I want to go on is home to write my essay."

"Well you can't go home until you complete your journey."

"Fine what do I have to do?"

"Return each Charm where it should rightfully be and on your way home you will be."

"Charms? What charms?" I ask looking around.

"The one's on the bracelet that you have in your hand," Elle says sarcastically.

In all of my confusion, I had forgotten I was holding the bracelet.

"So where should they ;?was I ask.

"That's for you to figure out."

"I thought you were suppose to be helping me"

"I am," Elle says brightly, "But I'm not your maid."

"Could you at least tell me something that'll help me."

"Well, each charm is a clue to where it belongs."

I hold the bracelet up and examine each charm carefully. A flower, a book, and an ice cream cone.

"Think about each thing and where it goes," Elle says coming closer and peering over my shoulder at the bracelet.

"Well, a book belongs in a library," I think out loud.

"Exactly," Elle yells jumping up and down "You do you have a little bit of common sense."

I roll my eyes.

"So where's the library?"

"Follow me."

Elle starts to skip down a pathway between two of the patterned trees.

"This is seriously insane," I say to myself as I run to catch up with her.

We make our way to an opening in the trees and before us lies a small street made out of brightly colored stones. On either side, there are elaborately decorated buildings. Some have

stars painted on the outside, others sparkle in the bright pink sunlight.

"Is the library one of those buildings?" I ask turning to Elle.

"Yup."

"Which one?"

"I don't know,"

"You know you're really not helping right."

Elle smiles mischievously.

"I didn't say how much help I would ;. I just said I'd help you. You take things too literally."

Ignoring Elle I start making my way down the street. I choose a building at random and go up to the door. It doesn't look anything like a library, but then again, none of these buildings do.

I pull the door open and I'm greeted with an empty shop. The shelves and display cases hold nothing and beside the sun filtering in through the windows, it's completely dark.

I step back outside and look around for Elle. She's standing a little farther down on the sidewalk in front of a rectangular shaped building covered in some kind of unreadable writing.

"Did you find it?" I call as I come closer.

"Maybe."

I sigh in frustration and walk up to the door. I open the door to an empty shop.

"Why are all of these buildings abandoned?" I ask Elle.

"There not."

"Clearly they are. There's nothing here."

"Of course there's nothing there. You haven't imagined it yet."

"Imagined it. Imagined what?"

"The library, that's what we're looking for right?"

"So no matter what I do, I won't find the library until I imagine it?"

"This place is the land of Imaginaria. I thought I told you that already."

"Okay, so how do I imagine then."

Elle sighs dramatically and puts her hands on her hips.

"You're telling me you don't know how to imagine. If you didn't know how to imagine I wouldn't be here."

"I'm still trying to figure out why I'm here," I mutter under my breath.

"Come on, try it." she says, "We use to imagine together all the time."

"That was back then. I'm too old for that now. There has to be another way to find the library."

I start to make my way to another building.

"There isn't another way. You have to imagine it," Elle calls after me.

I stop walking and turn to face her again.

"Just because you imagine things doesn't mean they just become real." It comes out much angrier than I intended.

"It's real to you. You imagined me and I'm here. Aren't I?"

I take this into consideration. She is here. I'm here. Wherever here is.

I close my eyes and try to picture a library. I think about the books and the sounds and sights of a library.

"You're doing it. You're doing it," Elle cheers.

I open my eyes and I'm standing in an aisle between two tall wooden shelves, that almost reach up to the ceiling. As far as I can see, there are books. It's cold and the smell of paper and ink

fills my lungs. The lights have a soft glow to them and there's are potted plants in every corner.

"You did it," Elle comes skipping towards me from the end of one of the isles.

"Shhh."

We both turn to see a man in a long white robe decorated with what looks like words. He has jet black hair and a matching beard.

"Sorry, Mr. Tales, I was just congratulating Leah on finding the library."

"Hello, have we met before?" Mr. tales asks.

"I don't think so. I'm not from here."

"Oh, is this your journey?" the librarian asks staring me down.

"I guess."

"Yes, yes, wonderful. You look about the right age for girls and boys to receive their charms of imagination."

"right age? What do you me right age?"

"I mean, you're about the right age to be in search of the charm of imagination."

"I'm just here to get help with my story and to hopefully get back home,"

"Very well."

He smiles at me and holds out a hand. I take it and we shake.

"Now, what book are you looking for?"

I show him the golden book charm.

"I'm suppose to return it. Do you know where it goes?"

"Yes, but it's not my job to figure it out. It's all up to you."

"Aren't you the librarian," I ask.

"Yes, but it's not my journey. It's yours,"

"Okay, but how am I suppose to know where it goes. There's millions of books here. Are they arranged in a particular order or something?"

"No, they are all just here. But, to find the one you're looking for, think of your favorite book."

"My favorite book?"

"Yes, you must have a favorite book. Out of all of these," the librarian waves his hands "Your favorite book must be here somewhere."

I try to think. I haven't read any books recently except my school textbooks.

"Well, a few months ago, I read a book for class detailing the lives of great american figures. It was pretty good. Does that count?"

"Boring," Elle blurts out, "That's not your favorite book."

"How do you know, what my favorite book is?"

"Because I use to be your best friend and you never told me anything about great American figures."

"Well then," I challenge her "What is my favorite book, since you seem to know everything."

"I'm not telling. You have to figure that out yourself. It's your favorite book."

She turns and skips down another isle.

"Think all the way back. Try to remember a book that really touched you," the librarian says "It doesn't have to be recent."

I think back, trying to remember all of the books I've read. A memory starts to form and in my mind and I'm transported back to when I was little. I'm sitting on the soft purple rug in my childhood bedroom. The walls are covered in lavender wall paper and a long line of stuffed

animals sit in front of me.

"Okay everyone, it's story time," my high pitched child like voice announces.

From beside me, Elle claps her hands.

"Is it A Little Princess?" she asks bouncing up and down.

"Yes," I answer, "Now everyone quiet. Here we go."

It use to be my favorite book. I'd imagine myself living in old England, attending a boarding school. I read that book so many times, until I realized none of that stuff could happen in the world today and I'd never truly be a princess.

I pull myself back to the present.

"A Little Princess," I say to the librarian.

"Let's see," he says pulling a book from the shelf to the right of us.

"Look here," he holds up the book and points to a small hole in the wooden cover, "Try to fit the charm inside."

I remove the charm from the bracelet and place it into the small hole. It didn't quite fit.

"It doesn't fit," I say pulling the charm away.

"Wait, what do you like about the book? Think about what about the book made you happy as a child."

I'm transported back to my childhood room. I can see myself reading A Little Princess to Elle and the teddy bears again. I imagine myself reading out loud, visions of me as a princess at a boarding school, reading to the other girls and telling them all about what it means to be a princess.

I'm so caught up in my thoughts that I don't notice that the charm has settled perfectly into the little square in the top right corner of the book.

"You've done it my dear," Mr. Tales squeezes my shoulder and gives me a warm smile.

"See, I didn't even have to tell you," Elle appears beside me, "Come on we have to go."

She pulls me by my hand toward the door.

"Bye Mr. Tales," she calls.

I wave.

"Thank you."

"Good luck," he calls after us.

"So where to next," I ask Elle.

"The ice cream cone and the flower," she points to the bracelet, "Let's go get ice cream first."

"Where?"

"At Leah's Delight, the ice cream parlor," she says already running down the street.

"Hold on, where are you going. I don't know where that is."

"Of course you do. You imagined it." She turns around in the middle of the street.

"I haven't imagined it yet."

"Yes you have, remember we ran it together. You made the ice cream and I was the server."

I do remember. When I was younger, I wanted to run an ice cream parlor. I always liked the idea of the different toppings and flavors. I wanted to have my own chain of ice cream parlors, until my parents told me that wasn't a practical career choice.

I catch up to Elle and follow her down the street. We turn a corner and up ahead I see a cone shaped building.

"Let me guess, I have to imagine it or it's going to be empty."

"Yup," Elle says "Now hurry up, I'm hungry."

I close my eyes again, and imagine an ice cream parlor. I imagine what I wanted my ice cream parlor to look like as a kid and how it felt to pretend. The air fills with the scent of sugar and I can hear the voices of people and when I open my eyes an old woman in a floral apron appears behind a counter. It's freezing inside and the walls are decorated with colorful posters of different kinds of ice cream. There are pictures of ice cream cones with different toppings and extravagant looking sundaes.

"Hello, welcome to Leah's Delights. May I take your order?"

"My name's Leah and I'm here to return this," I hold out the charm to her.

"Ahh, I was waiting for you to return and bring this back," she takes the charm.

"Return? I've never been here."

"Oh yes, you use to come here all the time, except you use to make the ice cream," she says,

"Have you found what you're looking for?"

"Well, I found this place, so I guess I have."

"That's not what I meant. I meant have you found what you were looking for as in why you were sent here."

"No, not yet. I still have no idea what I'm going to write about," I answer dropping my eyes.

"Well, you will. Now, would you two like some ice cream?"

"Yes, I'd like two scoops of birthday cake with extra sprinkles and chocolate chips on top," Elle pushes her way in front of me to get to the counter.

"Coming right up and you Miss Leah?"

"Um, just plain vanilla."

"That's all?" Miss Clover raises her eyebrows, "We have any flavor and any topping you want."

She points to the display case filled with different kinds of ice cream. There are so many. I don't recognize most of them.

"Can I have the cake batter ice cream with sprinkles and gummy bears on top then?"

"Absolutely."

Miss Clover disappears behind the counter and Elle turns and looks at me.

"You remember when we use to run this place and we'd spend all day inventing new flavors," she asks.

"Yeah."

I really do. I always loved pretending to mix all kind of flavors together to come up with my own.

I look around at all the customers sitting at the tables. The tables are decorated with colorful dishes and elaborate centerpieces.

Mis Clover returns with the ice cream and Elle and I take them to go.

"We have one more," I tell her as we step back out into the street, "And then I can finally go home."

I look at the flower. It's a rose, all bright red and blooming. I immediately think about the garden in my old backyard, where I'd come up with all kinds of stories and games. I stopped doing there when I was about twelve and started to focus more on school.

As we near the end of the street, I glance around.

"Where are we?"

All around us are dead flowers. Their brown dried up stems sticking out of the ground like stiff scraps of wood.

"This is the garden," Elle says kneeling down and examining a stem with a small bud on it.

"What happened to it?"

"All the flowers died."

"How, it seems like the perfect time for them to bloom."

The weather was warm but not too hot and the trees that I saw when I first arrived were in perfect bloom. I couldn't understand why this specific spot was so dead.

"Well, when you stopped coming here, all the flowers started dying. They haven't bloomed in forever."

Elle picks a weed and tosses it in the air.

"Oh."

I don't really know what to say. It's true I haven't imagined this place in a while or imagined anything for that matter. The only thoughts that fill my head these days are numbers, facts, and other things for school and planning my practical future, finish college, start my career.

"How do we bring them back to life?" I finally ask.

"You have to want them to come back to life."

I give Elle a questioning look.

"I have to want them to come back to life. Of course I want them to come back to life. This place looks horrible."

"I mean, you have to want to imagine them again."

As I stare at the dead flowers, I realize I do want to imagine them again. I want to come to this place again and bring things to life in the land of Imaginaria. My life doesn't have to be so real and practical all the time. It's okay to imagine things that aren't real now and then. It's also okay to dream impractical dreams. As I look at the flowers, they begin to bloom. The once dried up stems turn green and blossoms of all types and colors start to appear.

"There back," Elle dances among the newly bloomed flowers.

"What about the charm? Where does it go?"

"Duh, it goes in the garden" Elle laughs still twirling around.

"Where in the garden?"

"Wherever you want."

I unhook the charm from the bracelet and hold it in my palm for a moment. Then I kneel down in the cool soil and make a tiny hole. I place the charm inside and imagine a bush full of red roses growing in its place.

"Okay, I've put all the charms back now how do I get back home?"

Elle stops twirling and comes to stand next to me.

"Do you really want to leave that bad?" her face falls and she takes my hand.

"No, I don't mean it like that, I just have this assignment due in the morning." I meet her eyes.

"You promise you'll come back. I really missed you."

"I promise and to prove it," I take the bracelet off and hand it to her, "I'm giving you this and while I'm gone you can fill it with more charms so that when I come back, we can figure out where they go."

"Okay," she clasps the bracelet on her wrist and hugs me for a long time.

"Now, how do I get home?"

"You have to imagine it like everything else."

"Of course I do."

I picture my tiny dorm room with its thin walls, cramped space, and huge pile of textbooks and suddenly I'm being pulled into a vacuum of light and sound again. As I'm being pulled out of the garden, just beyond the deafening sound of Twinkle Twinkle, I hear Elle shouting.

"You'd better keep your promise to come back. I better not spend my time finding all these charms for nothing."

I smile to myself, because for some reason, I know I'll be back, as soon as I finish writing my story.