

## The Book of Words

It wasn't as if Belle had gone criminally insane, so she ignored her doctor's advice to seek psychiatric treatment. It was an inconsequential problem, really. Would hardly make a difference in the whole scheme of things. And yet her parents and her doctor were freaking out, treating her like she was a helpless child who didn't know how to take care of herself.

Only a few months ago, Belle looked at the hands of the clock, and for the first time in her life couldn't make out the meaning.

"What time did you say it was, dear," Randy had said.

"I didn't say anything," she replied, squinting at the hands of the clock.

Later that day, after explaining her inability to read the clock to her husband, he sat her down with paper and pencil and asked her to draw a clock face at 3:45. She got the circle right. But the numbers were all wrong—a backwards 3, an upside down 4, and several hieroglyphic-looking symbols that signified nothing—and were clustered in the middle of the circle instead of around the edges.

As another test, her husband showed her a digital clock, displaying the numbers 5:08. When he asked her what it said, she replied, "Farm."

Randy's frown told her that this was not the correct answer. She knew perfectly well what the clock was for, she'd simply lost the ability to tell time.

How long she'd been unable to read clocks, she didn't know. Her husband assured her that she used to be able to read clocks, and she thought so too. But how could she be sure? Maybe she only thought she knew how, but really was using other clues, like the position of the sun, or the amount of traffic on University Street, to assume the time of day.

At Randy's insistence, Belle went to the doctor and he recommended a psychiatrist who specialized in dementia.

"I'm not demented," Belle informed him.

The doctor gave Belle a look you'd give a bird that couldn't find its way out of an open cage. He said he didn't mean to offend her, and encouraged her to keep a journal.

Belle found journaling to be a great joy. She chronicled with great detail her every waking hour. Writing, she found, helped her make sense of her world, drew connections she'd have never made on her own. For example, she discovered that she wore the color green almost every day, and green was her father's favorite color; her father suffered from early onset Alzheimer's and died of pneumonia when she was 8 years old; she saw traces of her father in Randy sometimes, and it was those brief moments that she loved most about him.

After several weeks of this, her husband asked her if she would share some of the things she'd been writing about. It would probably be better than half the submissions he had to go through for his job at the Literary Quarterly. She said she'd begun writing poetry, and she opened to a page with a short poem, which read:

*Socks officer cancel desperately  
Umbrella toward ketchup respectively*

*Elephant fever honestly water  
Sail blindly, mercury tango...*

Belle's eyes beamed like flashlights, wide and intelligent, showing no outward sign of mental deterioration.

When Randy had finished reading, he handed the journal back to her and said, "It's real good, darling."

"You like it?" she gasped.

"Of course I like it."

"It's about you."

"Is that right?"

"You couldn't tell?"

"I've never understood poetry all that much."

Belle nodded understandingly and said, "It just takes practice."

From then on, whenever Randy came home, he would find Belle balled up in the bed, scribbling in her journal, working out a poem, she'd say. She'd write in the bathtub, on the toilet, even while she was watching tv.

One day, Belle approached her husband with a book in her hand, saying, "Since when do you know Russian?"

Her husband cocked his head. "I don't know Russian."

She handed him a massive book, "What's this, then?"

He looked at the cover, "Anna Karenina?"

Belle's eyebrows arched high. "If you're not learning Russian, where did this come from?"

Randy flipped through the book, a relic from his college days. He'd read it from cover to cover, his annotations penciled in the margins. Randy assured his wife that every word was in English.

She snatched the book from him and opened to a random page. She pointed at a word. "What about this word? What does it say?"

"Across."

She squinted at it, still fuming. Then she threw the book onto the table, toppling the glasses so they rolled and crashed to the floor.

The next day she approached Randy again, ghostly white and trembling like a sapling in the wind. Her husband sat her down and asked what's wrong.

"There's something wrong with the words," she said, handing him another book, *Cannery Row*. "I've read this twice. I remember reading it. But now the words are different. Not even words anymore."

"It's not your fault," he said.

"Is it going to be like this forever?" she asked quietly.

"We can't reverse it, but we can slow it. Maybe," he said. "The journal writing is supposed to help."

She held his warm hand with both of hers. His eyes were dark and understanding.

"I've been writing a lot," she said.

"That's real good."

"I have enough for a book, I think. I might try to get it published. I already have a title: *The Book of Words*."

"Sounds good."

"Come on. Tell me the truth," she said, leaning closer to him. "Do you really think my work could get published?"

She'd recited several of her poems to him aloud. In his opinion they were not so much poems as random words strung across the page. So he measured his words carefully. "I understand the passion that you put into them."

She rolled her eyes, smiling. "Jeeze, I'm being serious. I just need to know what you really think."

"How many do you have?"

"Forty-five or so."

"I'll talk to my editor, see if he can help get it published. I can't make any promises, but he'll definitely take a look at it."

Belle smiled like a mischievous child and bit one of her nails. "You didn't answer my question," she said.

"What do I really think about your work?" Randy said.

She nodded, biting another nail now.

He took a breath, his mind teeming. "Your words are stars," he said at last.

"Stars?" she said.

"Sure. Like when you look at a cluster of stars in the sky. One person sees the Big Dipper, another person sees a bear. Your words don't connect the dots, they are the dots. That way, people see what they want to see in your poems." After saying all of this, Randy realized he was probably right. Perhaps his wife had stumbled upon a whole new way to use words: leaping from word to word, allowing the reader to draw the lines of logic.

He assured her that, whether or not the book ever got published, her work was important.

It was past supper time, and while Randy prepared a stir fry with grilled chicken, Belle sat at the dinner table and wrote in her journal, silently mouthing syllables and sounds, hunting for the perfect word.