

The Right Place

by Kathy Latusick

Was I even in the right place? I stood on a stone step in front of a dark wooden door, the small porch roof shielding me from the rain.

The heavy door opened easily when I pushed on it, and I looked down the gloomy corridor. Cobwebs festooned the portraits lining the walls. Odors of dust and old wood wafted toward me. I shivered. A place to lure unsuspecting women. I should turn around and go home. And yet, the message intrigued me. Drew me. I stepped inside.

My wet tennies squeaked on the stone floor, echoing down the cavernous hallway, and I stopped. I looked down at my phone; scrolled to the e-mail that had brought me here. Spam. I should have just deleted it, unread. I didn't know why I had opened it.

"My dearest Leandra," it began. Not even addressed to me.

I'd always liked my name; shared it with some fascinating people. Anne of Green Gables. Princess Anne. Orphan Annie. But 'Leandra' – Anne seemed suddenly drab in comparison. I would like to be Leandra.

"I don't make any promises," the letter went on. "I can only offer friendship and adventure." The instructions were to come to the Brownnton Mansion, an abandoned building beyond the edge of town. To go around back and enter through the gallery. It was signed, "Your new best friend, Celestine."

I sighed. Even though I wasn't Leandra, maybe Celestine would be my friend. No one else seemed to want to be.

The door slammed behind me. I jumped, and spun. I should have known better! I yanked on the door handle, expecting it to be locked. It opened easily, letting in the wan afternoon light. Letting in the sound and smell of the rain. Standing in the doorway, I waited for my pounding heart to slow.

I peered into the dim interior. Back out into the waning drizzly day. Down at my phone. Celestine. What a pretty name. Her offer wasn't to me, but maybe, if I came, she'd include me. I let the door swing shut, and started once again down the long narrow room.

Flicking on my phone light, I aimed it at the portraits. The colors were faded, in some places the paint cracked and flaking away. Some had name plates under them; 'Millicent Brownton, 1790', was a slim woman, seated under a large tree, the details of the picture blurred by grime and fading paint. People long dead, their lives lost to the passing of time. Long forgotten. I paced slowly past the paintings, examining them, looking for ... I wasn't sure what.

I came to a painting that was not faded. Not covered with spiderwebs. The colors still bright, almost looking three-dimensional. Rather than a stiffly posed portrait, this painting showed a room. A young woman, maybe twenty, sat in a wing-backed chair, her face turned slightly away. To her right a door stood ajar, a hint of emerald light gleaming through. She seemed to be looking at the door. Her skin was pale, her hair black, and she wore an ankle length dress of green brocade. A thin gold band circled her brow.

Impulsively, I reached out to touch the painting, feeling the rough texture of the ornate rug. The figure moved, and I jerked my hand back. Her head turned toward me, and she smiled. "Hello, Leandra. I've been expecting you." Her voice was the silver tinkle of tiny bells.

"I'm not Leandra." Oh, how that broke my heart to say. "I'm just Anne." I so wanted to be Leandra. To be Celestine's friend.

I blinked and stepped back, realizing I was talking to a painting. Was I dreaming? I looked around, at the dreary gallery, the cobweb-draped paintings, the smell of must and age. If it was a dream, it was awfully vivid.

"But you could be," the woman said. "That's why I sent you the message." She stood and stepped to the frame of the painting. "Come, we haven't much time. The easiest route is through my door." She pointed toward the door in the painting. "But I'm afraid you won't fit. So..." She stepped off the edge of the frame.

I gasped, and reached to catch her. At only four inches tall, it was a long drop to the floor.

Her silver laughter rippled as gauzy wings unfurled. She landed lightly on my shoulder. "So we'll go through your door." She gripped my ear for balance. "I could fly, but I'd leave you behind. This is easier for both of us. Just continue on along the corridor."

I stared at the painting – the door and chair unchanged except for the absence of a figure in it. The door slowly closed, and the colors faded, even as I watched. How was that possible? I reached up and ran my hand across the painting. Flat. Smooth.

"Well, of course you can't feel anything." Her voice chimed in my ear. "The portal closed as soon as I stepped out of it."

"What?" I blinked at the now faded painting.

"No, you aren't dreaming," she said in her crystalline voice. "I'm real. Just as real as you are." Her hand was warm on my ear, a warmth that spread and suffused through me. "Your kind has various names for my people – fairies, sprites, pixies."

"But fairies are just a story," I objected. "A fable. A myth."

Her laughter was like the mist from a waterfall. "Based on truth. No, we're not magic. We have abilities that you don't have, and technology that you don't understand. We've co-existed for thousands of years, but in recent generations we had to leave your world. It became too dangerous for us."

"Then why ...?"

"Because we miss you. We have invited some of your kind to join us in our new world."

My footsteps echoed on the stone floor as I continued slowly down the hallway, playing my light across the portraits, still not sure that I wasn't dreaming. "Do you need help?" Not that I could give any. I was barely able to take care of myself.

Her laughter tickled my ear. "Oh, no. We're quite self-sufficient. We don't need anything. But we're lonely. We got on so well with your ancestors."

Lonely. I sighed at her words. Oh, how I wanted this to not be a dream. I wished this could be true. That I could be Leandra. That Celestine would be my friend.

Another painting was bright, and I stopped. In this one a middle-aged man sat on a sofa, his feet propped on an ottoman. He, too, looked through a door, slightly ajar. He wore a blue frock coat, short tan breeches with knee buckles, white stockings, green shoes with curled-up toes, and a green hat with a blue feather in it. He turned and smiled as my light played across him, but didn't get up.

"Good evening, Celestine. I see you found yours. Welcome, Leandra."

"I thought fairies were always young," I said. He, too, had called me Leandra. Could I really be? Was it possible?

"Of course not," Celestine replied. "I am. I'm only 200 years old. I just had my –"

"Two hundred!" I jerked my head toward her, yanking her off my shoulder. Her wings fluttered, tangled in my hair, her hand desperately gripping my ear. "Sorry," I said, turning my head so she could step back onto my shoulder. "But 200 years old? 'Only'?"

"Oh, yes." I felt her disentangling herself from my hair. "As I started to say, I had my coming-of-age just before I came through into the painting. Deverin is much older. He's 600. He was actually born on your world."

The little man in the painting winked at me. "You need to get going. The portal won't stay open long." He turned back to his contemplation of the door.

"So, he's not coming?" I asked as I continued down the dark corridor. If he was 600 years old, then he was born when ... I shook my head, not able to comprehend that kind of age.

"Oh, no." Celestine laughed softly in my ear. "He's waiting for the person he invited."

"But the portal? What if his person doesn't come?" I almost hadn't.

"He'll just go back through his door. But we need to hurry."

The urgency in her voice drove all other thoughts from my head, and I lengthened my stride, no longer looking at the pictures we passed. I reached the end of the corridor, and turned the corner into a large room. A ballroom? My light didn't shine far enough to see the other side. The floor appeared to be parquet, alternating dark and light wood, but the pattern was obscured by years of collected dust and grime.

Celestine let go of my ear and fluttered away. I rubbed my suddenly cold ear, feeling the deep loneliness of her absence. I reached for her, but she swooped away.

She darted up, above my head, and then back down, side to side as if she were dancing in the air. A hint of green light trailed her, like a comet's tail. The streak of light grew brighter and longer, until it outlined a doorway. Still she danced, filling the doorway with light, drawing it open. The same green light that shone through the doorway in her painting.

She landed on my shoulder, slightly out of breath. "You don't have to go," she said. "You can stay here and still be Anne. I want you to go with me, but if you do, you'll never be able to come back."

I could see through the doorway now. A green meadow, surrounded by trees. A thatched cottage stood off to one side. Longing filled me. I wanted to go, but ... "Never?" What if I didn't like it there? What if I got there and then changed my mind?

"It takes a lot of energy to open the portal wide enough for a human to go through," she replied. "We can only do it when the worlds align. That won't happen again in your lifetime."

I thought of my life. College. Hopefully, a career, though I hadn't yet decided what I wanted to do. I gazed through the doorway, wanting to go, but afraid. Step through into the unknown? Leave everything behind? Or stay and ... And what? Unknown, either way. But safe, here. Over there?

She pointed to the phone in my hand. "That won't work there."

I looked at it, scrolling through my contacts. Classmates from college. An ex-boyfriend. Mom, who'd died of cancer a year before. My father – I'd met him once, but didn't know him. No one who I really cared for. "There's nothing here I can't leave." I dropped the phone, hearing it crack as it hit the floor, and stepped through the doorway.

I stood on the green grass, Celestine on my shoulder, and took a deep breath of air so fresh, so pure, it was like a drink of wine. Oh, yes. I was definitely in the right place.

End

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