

## ***The Legend of Belleville***

### **Sunset over Belleville**

The sky turned pinkish-gray after the sun dropped below the horizon beyond the old town of Belleville. It was autumn and a bracing chill lingered in the air, along with the faint smell of smoke and the ripeness of farm animals. Wheat stubble and cut corn stalks, the remnants of another season under the sun, covered the fields in the countryside. Dust devils twisted and whipped and spent their last bit of the day's energy. A long lake stretched out from the north side of town. It was empty except for a lone fisherman in a rowboat. Occasionally a flock of geese flew overhead, heading south for the winter.

Two horse carts clackety-clacked down the cobblestone main street in the center of town. They passed by unlit storefronts, an inn, a tavern and several children with disinterested expressions sitting on a rail fence. The large houses in town were on the cross streets, which turned to gravel and dirt after a block and eventually became country roads. If a traveler followed the main street out of town a few miles, it intersected a busy highway. But few travelers made the journey to Belleville because it was out of the way – and quiet and humdrum and not well known.

The horse carts stopped in front of the town hall. Several folks were already standing outside, some chatting and some smoking. The clock tower on top read four thirty-seven. Unfortunately it was only right twice per day because it had stopped the year before. No one had yet fixed it. It was actually eight o'clock in the evening.

A man with gray hair and a charcoal vest pushed open the front door and motioned for everyone to come inside the building.

### **Something's Wrong**

*Thud, thud, thud.* The gray-haired Mayor Morgenstern stood on a platform at the front of the hall and rapped his brass-tipped cane on the wooden floorboards. "This town meeting is now in session. Everyone please take a seat."

The Mayor paused, looked around somberly and cleared his throat. "Thank you everyone for coming tonight. This is my fifth year as mayor and sixty-fifth as a citizen of Belleville. This town has always been my home. So I am especially sad to say we are confronted by a grave matter. The truth is, my friends, Belleville is slowly passing away."

"The number of folks living in our town is only half what it was ten years ago, and half again from twenty years ago. This year, five good, honest farming families have picked up and left. The cheese factory has closed down. Many of our young men and women are leaving for the hustle and bustle and opportunity of the big city. Why, buildings need painting. Fences need mending. Even the clock on the tower has stopped." The Mayor pointed up, as if toward the tower. "My fellow citizens, something must be done or Belleville may one day dry up." He then sat in a chair, facing the audience.

Farmer Toolsy stood up, nervously clasping his straw hat in hand. "I don't know, but my cows are less generous with milk these days. I think they're drying up too!"

"Oh, my haberdashery is a museum," swooned Lady Blue. "People walk through, poke at shirts, try on hats, but buy nothing. They just keep wearing the same old, dreary clothes."

Old Man Chatters, rocking in his chair, appeared confused and concerned at the same time. "Something's wrong, I tell ya', something's wrong..."

Baker Roland complained, "And my bread always tastes a day old – even the day I make it!"

"Now folks, what you say is true, but pray tell, what do we do?" asked the Mayor.

Madame Muse shuffled in her seat and rose slowly to her feet. "My fellow citizens, I believe we need a Big Idea."

"A Big Idea?" said the Mayor.

"Yes, a Big Idea that rallies the town and turns it around."

"Is a Big Idea big enough to help my lazy cows?" asked Farmer Toolsy.

"And my day-old bread?" asked Baker Roland.

"It can be, yes," replied Madame Muse.

There was silence in the hall as everyone gave this a collective thought, followed by murmuring and mumbling. Miller Sawyer hesitantly stood up. "Sometimes I go to the city to sell lumber from the mill. They have buildings so tall you can hardly see the top. People go in and come out – lots of them. It's like a city in a city! Maybe Belleville needs a tall building too. Maybe that would turn this place around."

"A very interesting idea," said Mayor Morgenstern. The town people talked about it at length. An hour later, the Mayor stood up and proclaimed: "Then it is settled. A tall building we will build. Long live Belleville!"

"Long live Belleville!" echoed the people.

## **A Building So Tall**

Though it was not an easy endeavor, the community came together to erect the tallest building the town had ever seen. People donated lumber, bricks and paint. Others cut boards, hammered nails and laid bricks. The Belleville Sentinel reported regularly on progress: "Extra, extra, one more floor finished. Read all about it!" An infectious enthusiasm rippled through the countryside as people awoke to the idea that the town might come to life again, thanks to a building that would rival those in the big city.

The finished building was a sight to behold! The stately, red-brick structure dwarfed the other shops and houses on Main Street. It rose several stories in the air and had glass windows on every floor. Broad steps led up to the front entrance. Trees grew and flowers bloomed around it. The town held a grand opening, where the Mayor placed a placard in front that announced: "BUILT BY THE GOOD PEOPLE OF BELLEVILLE."

Several months passed and the turnaround everyone anticipated had not yet come. The new brick building was still mostly vacant. A couple of shops had moved to the ground floor, including Lady Blue's haberdashery. On the second floor was the Stickler & Goad Law Firm. The Mayor took an office with an impressive view on the top floor, but he grew tired of the long march up and down the stairs and moved back to the town hall. In any case, the tall building did not live up to Miller Sawyer's vision of a city in a city, with many people coming and going. It did not change the course of the town.

### **Same Old Belleville?**

*Thud, thud, thud.* Mayor Morgenstern stood on the platform in the town hall and brought the meeting to order. The people took their seats.

He stretched out his cane and pointed to a window on the side of the hall. Beyond it, silhouetted in the evening light, stood the tall, brick building. "It is magnificent, isn't it? A proud accomplishment for all of us."

"Hear, hear," affirmed the audience.

"It speaks to what can be done when people put their minds together." The Mayor furled his brow and looked down at the floor. "As I think we need to put our minds together again. Farmer Toolsy, are your cows giving more milk?"

"No, Mayor, they aren't. Why, Bessy is just as fussy and..."

"Thank you, Farmer Toolsy," the Mayor interjected. "And Lady Blue, how is your shop?"

"We moved to the lovely new building," replied Lady Blue, "but it's still as quiet as a library on the Sabbath." Her eyes moistened and a tear streaked down her cheek. "Oh, Mayor, we have a building like a big city, but not the crowds and the bustle. It's the same old Belleville!" She took out a handkerchief and dabbed her eyes.

The people murmured in agreement. Old Man Chatters rocked in his chair. "Something's wrong, I tell ya', something's wrong..."

Madame Muse leaned forward, pushed on her armrests and stood up. "With due respect to all, I think something has changed. This is not the same old Belleville. We have a lovely building, yes, but we also have a Big Idea."

"I thought the building was the Big Idea." said Miller Sawyer.

"The Big Idea is even bigger than the building," replied Madame Muse, pausing briefly. "The Big Idea is that Belleville can – and will – come back to life!"

"What do you mean?" asked the Mayor. "I am not sure I understand."

"Do you mean we should try again?" asked Miller Sawyer.



“Yes, that’s the idea,” she smiled. “That’s the idea.”

A moment later Baker Roland’s eyes brightened, as if suddenly inspired. “Well, then I have an idea too. I once visited a city next to an ocean. Ships came and went, loading and unloading cargo at a long wharf. What a prosperous city it was! Perhaps Belleville needs a wharf. That might make us prosperous too!”

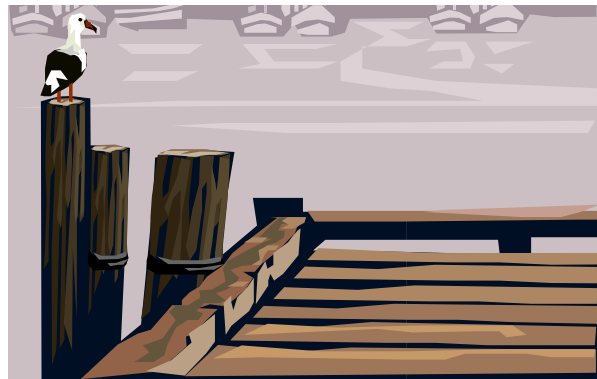
And so it was that the town decided to build a wharf on the lake at the edge of town.

### **A Wharf So Long**

The community came together again to build – this time, instead of a tall building, a long wharf. They drove wooden pylons into the muddy lake bottom. They laid boards to form piers that jutted into the lake. When completed, the long wharf had places for several ships to dock, pulleys and cranes to move cargo and a storage warehouse. It was everything Belleville needed to become a port town.

Everyone gathered to celebrate its completion. Miller Sawyer docked his barge and invited as many as could fit for a cruise on the lake. It was a happy event, as people looked forward to how the wharf might change the town’s fortune.

But once again, months passed without any major change in the life and times of Belleville. Enthusiasm waned as hope drained.



### **What Now?**

*Thud, thud, thud.* Mayor Morgenstern brought the meeting to order. “Welcome, my fellow citizens.” He looked around and saw a roomful of downcast and troubled faces. “I am sure everyone knows why we are meeting tonight. For years, our beloved town had been in steady and certain decline. Rather than roll over and accept such a fate, we rallied as a community. We worked to build a magnificent building and impressive wharf, in hope that these would spur a new vibrancy and prosperity. And perhaps they will, but alas, we have not yet seen a change. Many are asking, ‘what now?’ What now, indeed.”

Lady Blue was the first in the audience to speak. “Mayor, how can we go on? I feel hopeless. Was it all for nothing?”

Farmer Toolsy sighed in agreement. “I hate to say it, makes me sick to say it, but maybe it’s time to move on. Maybe it’s time to leave for greener pastures.”

“Where would we go?” asked Baker Roland. “Most of us have been here our whole lives and don’t know anything else.”

“Perhaps the young people have it right.” answered Miller Sawyer. “The opportunity is in the big city. The bustle, the trade, masses of people – it’s all in the city. The rest of us could pack up and move there too. We could start over.”

“And abandon Belleville, our home?” exclaimed the Mayor. “Let the wind and the rain and the sun wear it away and erase it as if we were never here? I can’t bear to think of it. There must be something more we can do.”

Old Man Chatters began to sway in his chair. Before he could say anything, Madame Muse spoke up, “My friends, our cause is not lost. There is still hope for our town. Listen, so far we have looked outside of Belleville for the answer. We looked to the big city and followed its ways because we thought this would work for us too. But Belleville is not the big city, and what makes it unique and dear to us is not found in the big city, but only here.”

“I’m sorry, Madame, that went right over my head,” said Miller Sawyer. “What do you mean?”

“I mean we should look within Belleville for the answer to our problem. I believe what we need is already here, and has been all along.”

“What is that?” he asked.

Madame Muse appeared thoughtful but did not say anything in reply. The hall was silent as everyone considered what she said.

Farmer Toolsy eventually broke the silence. “Well, I don’t know what that is exactly, but I got to tell ya’, some travelers from the city rode by my fields last week and were plum delighted to see the scarecrows standing at the edge of the rows. They stopped for a closer look and even told me they were ‘colorful’ and ‘artistic’. I said if you like mine, you should see the Jones’ farm down the lane. They have some really nice scarecrows. The city folks rode off, excited as can be.”

Lady Blue said, “My grandmother once told me Belleville was famous for its interesting and unusual scarecrows. Why, there still are a few strange-looking ones stacked the corner of my attic.”

“Yes,” said the Mayor, “I remember the scarecrow days. Folks always tried to outdo each other. You know, there are a couple old, dusty ones in my barn loft.”

“I still keep a scarecrow in the display window of my shop,” said Baker Roland, “holding a chocolate cake in one hand and a loaf of bread in the other!”

“You won’t find scarecrows like ours in the big city, that’s for sure!” said Miller Sawyer. He looked inquisitively at Madam Muse, and she smiled broadly in return. In fact, everyone in the room smiled.



### **Scarecrows So Unusual**

And out came the scarecrows – old and new, tall and short, silly and scary, beautiful and bizarre. The people set them on fields, yards, shops, curbs, roadsides, the town square. It was as if an army of brilliantly expressive, inanimate beings had invaded the town. If Belleville could not be like the big city, by heavens, it would be completely unlike it!

Incidentally, the travelers who stopped at Farmer Toolsy’s field told their friends in the city about the interesting and unusual scarecrows they saw in a sleepy little town off the highway. Soon enough, more

travelers arrived. They were amazed to find the town bursting with scarecrows – no two alike! Word spread quickly and visitors started coming from all over to see this spectacle themselves. They were also impressed by the friendly, down-to-earth people that lived in Belleville.

With the rush of visitors came activity and vibrancy. Instead of losing people, the town began to grow again. Lady Blue's haberdashery was bustling with business. Farmer Toolsy's cows became cheerful, consistent milk producers. Even Baker Roland's bread stayed fresh – after it was a day old! It was what the people had wanted. Belleville was renewed.

### **Sunrise over Belleville**

The sky brightened quickly as the sun rose over the town. It was spring and the moist air smelled of the earth coming back to life. Tiny, bright green shoots emerged from the tilled fields in the countryside. At the end of end of the rows were scarecrows, so many scarecrows. A stiff breeze on the lake next to town churned up whitecaps. Several cargo boats were docked at the wharf.

The bells in the clock tower chimed as the minute hand reached skyward. It was seven in the morning. The early birds began to arrive at the stately brick building for another day of work.

Sitting in a chair on the porch of his farmhouse, Old Man Chatters rocked gently as he took all of this in. His face glowed with contentment. He said nothing at all.

So Belleville was again the center of the universe. At least for the proud and happy people who lived there.

#### **About Apropos**

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