

a SNICKER *of*
MAGIC STORY

Becoming the Beedle



By
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Most people have plenty of names they go by in a lifetime.

We get our birth names, for starters.

(Mine is Jonah Pickett, if you're interested in details.)

Then we get nicknames. The best nicknames are the loving kind.

My dad calls me Bud.

Granny Effie calls me JP.

My friend Florentine calls me Honey-Bee, because of my yellow-spiky hair.

Most of us get stuck with a few nicknames we hate too, at least at some point in our lives. Granny Effie told me that some people spend their entire adulthoods trying to peel off a horrible nickname they got stuck with when they were kids. Mean is a hard thing to forget.

But there's another kind of name here in Midnight Gulch, a better kind. And it's a name that makes people smile whenever they hear it:

The Beedle.

And sometimes, like today, for example . . . The Beedle is me.

I don't look like a Beedle (or any other misspelled bug, for that matter). I look like a normal, spiky-haired kid sitting in his wheelchair, reading his favorite comic book—*Dr. Zook vs. The Alien-Robot-Megabirds*.

But tucked into this comic book is my phone. The phone screen glows, and I see the message:

Target spotted. 2nd Ave. ETA: 3 mins. Pumpernickel.

The text is from Big Bruce, a guy who works at my mom's hair salon. Big Bruce is six foot four, three hundred pounds of muscle. And underneath all that muscle and toughness is one of the gentlest hearts I've ever met. For that reason, I designated Bruce a Beedle Associate. He helps out with secret missions sometimes . . . but he keeps his association with the Beedle a secret.

As for the word *pumpernickel* . . . that's a code word we use for talking about Beedle stuff. There's no special meaning attached to it besides the fact that it's just fun to say.

I grin and text back:

Cool! Pumpernickel.

Exactly three minutes later, Mrs. Roberta Belle parks her tiny convertible in front of the sidewalk where I'm sitting. Her husband, Bo, is in the passenger seat. Roberta checks her white hair in the rearview mirror, and then she steps out and unloads Bo's walker from the trunk.

She helps him out of the car, nods to me, and grins. "Morning, Jonah!"

"Good morning, ma'am," I say in return. I nod to her husband. "Sir."

Bo Belle rests his shaky hands on the walker's handles. "Nice day, ain't it?" He grins. "Nothing like the sugar wind on a late afternoon."

Bo looks breathless already, even though he's barely been standing a minute.

"Yes, sir," I answer. "Sweetest smell in the world."

I've known Bo Belle for as long as I've lived here; he always accompanies Roberta to my mom's hair salon. But it's still a little bit shocking to see how much he's changed in the past few months. Bo used to be an able-bodied, lanky man—both attributes were helpful in his job as a home-builder. I've seen Bo carry heavy wooden beams on his shoulders, and scale ladders, graceful as a

bird on a high-wire. All of that changed when he became sick. Really sick.

I was in the salon when he told my mom about it a few months ago. Bo usually has a laugh tangled up in his voice. He appreciates a good joke, which made us fast friends. But his voice was soft that day; he spoke low because he was tired. And also, I figured, because he didn't want many people to hear.

"This might be my last haircut," he said as Mom combed his wispy gray hair.

"You and Roberta moving?" Mom asked. She tried to make it sound like a joke, but I could hear the worry in her voice.

"We spoke to the doctor today. He said the cancer's spread. I don't have much time left. Maybe a year. Maybe just a few months."

Mom didn't say a word; she rested her hands on Bo's shoulders. Her chin trembled.

Bo placed a shaky hand on hers and managed a smile. "It stinks now, don't get me wrong. I'm mad over it. And I'm a little afraid. But I reckon I've lived a fine and full life. And this gives me a chance to say what needs to be said. Take care of what needs taking care of.

Spend as much time with Ro as I can. I worry about her . . . after I'm gone."

Bo cleared his throat but didn't try to stop the teardrop from rolling down his tough old face.

"We'll all take care of Roberta," Mom assured him. She meant it, too. My mom doesn't believe in empty words. She keeps her promises.

Bo nodded. "I know you will. Thank you."

He rested his hands in his lap again. "You know, I can honestly say there's nothing I'd do over . . . 'cept one thing, maybe. Roberta was my high school sweetheart, you see, and I'd promised to take her to prom. She was so excited about that dance. Bought a new dress and everything. But then I enlisted for the war and shipped out right before prom. I told Roberta to go with someone else, but she said there wasn't a man in this town besides me she wanted to dance with anyhow."

My mom giggled. Bo grinned proudly.

"Ro told me I was doing something more important, serving the country. But I remember being on the other side of the ocean and thinking about her alone, in her dancing dress. With flowers in her hair and hope in her eyes. She deserves to be danced with. Every day, I

promised myself and I promised her that I'd make it back here. I missed our dance. But I wouldn't miss anything else, not if I could help it."

Mom gently ruffled her fingers through Bo's thick white hair as she snipped off the tips. "Now Bo Belle, you know you've given your wife a million more precious memories. I promise you she's not holding a grudge over her high school dance."

Bo grinned. Nodded. "She don't hold a grudge for nothing. But I wish I could give her that memory. I've often thought about what it'd be like if I could go back in time and hold her close to me and dance . . . because now I know—she's the best gift I've ever had in this lifetime. I had a hunch back then. But now I know."

I'd decided to make them a Beedle mission before Bo even got to that part of the story. I knew I had to give them the high school dance they'd missed. I didn't have much time to make it happen, but it had to happen.

And now, that time was at hand.

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I watch Ro and Bo amble side by side into my mom's salon—Jewell Pickett's Lube & Dye. My mom's shop is

one of the few shops in the state—heck, maybe the world—that combines full salon services with basic car repair. Every stylist knows how to do a quick and efficient oil change. And every mechanic knows how to cut a perfect mid-length bob and do a fabulous manicure. Big Bruce started out as a mechanic for Mom, but he much prefers his title of Chief Manicurist. Nobody does design work better than he does, and that's a fact.

As soon as the salon door jingles shut, and I make sure the blinds are closed tightly over Mom's windows (just like I specified), I text Big Bruce:

NOW! PUMPERNICKLE!

The tall camellia bushes across the road rattle and sway. A muscled, tattooed arm suddenly juts out and gives a thumbs-up.

Big Bruce pushes through the bushes, stray leaves stuck to his muscle shirt. He tosses a large box on the ground and whistles. My business associate, Oliver Weatherly, appears from behind another building with a box tucked under his arm and a cowboy hat pulled low over his eyes.

Big Bruce whistles in the other direction. And, just like we planned, my scraggly-bearded bus driver, Day Grissom, saunters down the street, carrying orange traffic cones under his arm. He uses the cones to block off the road, to make sure nobody travels down the street for a bit.

I wave everybody toward me for a quick Beedle-meeting.

"We have about thirty minutes to set up the dance for Bo and Ro," I tell them. "Everybody know their job? We good to go?"

Day Grissom salutes me. "Yes siree."

Oliver nods. "Pumpernickel."

Big Bruce grunts. "Pumpernickel."

Oliver and Big Bruce pull old ladders out from behind the bushes, and start stringing up sets of twinkly lights across the street.

I reach into my backpack and pull out the rolled-up banner I made. Then I push the top button on my wheelchair armrest and zoom toward Oliver and Bruce again. My parents are both accomplished mechanics, and one day last year Dad and I installed a turbo-boost

on my wheelchair. I'm not going to lie; it's pretty awesome. And it comes in handy for Beedle missions.

Together, Bruce and Oliver tie red ribbons to the holes at the edges of the banner. They climb the ladders again and fasten the banner to the string of lights. Finally, Day Grissom plugs a big boom box into the outlet on the side of Mom's beauty shop, and hooks the boom box to a giant speaker.

I nod at him.

Day walks across the street. Leans over Roberta's car. And sets off her alarm.

Then he gives us a thumbs-up and takes off running down the street, his long beard billowing in the wind.

"Go, go, go!" I whisper to my other cohorts. Bruce and Oliver hide the ladders, and we all duck behind the tall camellia bushes, out of breath. And excited. The car alarm blares.

Now, we wait.

*

While we wait, I should tell you about Oliver.

I first met my associate Oliver Weatherly on a foggy morning not too long ago. Mom had to go to work early in the shop, so I sat across the road beside Abigail

Honeycutt's Bench, just breathing in the new day. The scrap piece of paper in my hand was filmy with sweat.

We'll skip rocks at Snapdragon Pond

That's what the paper read, and the words were in the tiny scribble of my dad's handwriting. He'd left me a jar of promises, a year's worth of fun stuff we would do when he got home from being deployed overseas. Most days I woke up before the sun just because I was so excited to read them. His words were treasures to me. Made me feel like I was having a conversation with him, like we were still making secrets and memories even though he was on the other side of the ocean. I talked to him sometimes, sure. We even video chatted every now and then. But it's the little snips of conversation you start to miss when people are gone. Your heart deflates a little when you turn around to tell somebody a funny joke or a great idea and then remember they're not there.

Every morning, when I read a slip of paper, I felt hope, mostly. But that day, the missing place inside me hurt; it welled up like a balloon inside my throat. I don't think it's a big deal for guys to cry. Everybody cries. Still, I don't particularly want people to see me crying.

Tears come so easy sometimes, when the world gets quiet and the worries in my head get too loud.

I try not to imagine bad things happening. But sometimes I can't help it.

I think about what my mom's face would look like if she got the news that Dad had been injured. Or . . . worse.

What if we never got to skip rocks again at the pond? What if those little slips of paper were the last things I'd hear from him?

What if he never comes back?

Sadness pressed down heavy on my shoulders that morning. I'm not a morbid person, I swear. But the missing place is a hard space to deal with.

"Good morning, young man," said an older gentleman with a bundle of flowers in his hand.

He startled me right out of my daydreams. I hadn't even seen him walk up to me; he could have appeared out of the river fog for all I knew. He held bunches of wildflowers: daisies and brown-eyed Susans and roses. Every bloom was tied with a red ribbon.

"Morning, sir," I said back.

"Hey-yo," he said with a grin. He looked like somebody's grandpa. Not too tall; not too short. A bristly white mustache covered his upper lip, and he wore a cowboy hat to keep the sun out of his eyes. But the best part was his T-shirt, which had a picture of a giant ice-cream cone and the name of our town's most prized commodity.

"Dr. Zook's," I said, pointing to the shirt. "That stuff's awesome."

The man grinned. "Indeed it is! Is this spot taken? Mind if I sit a spell?"

I noticed a cool bird tattoo on his forearm as he sat down on the bench beside me.

"I don't mean to pry or anything," he said. "But . . . you okay? You're looking terrible-sad over here."

"Just missing somebody." I shrugged.

"Ah." He nodded, resting the flowers in his lap. "You can always tell when another person's caught up in the missing place. Loneliness calls out to loneliness, I believe."

So I paid closer attention now to the old man's eyes; they looked sad, but hopeful, too. A twinkly kind of blue.

"Are you missing somebody, too?" I asked him softly.

His chin trembled when he smiled. "Always. The memory of her brings a terrible ache. But it brings me joy, too. Still talk to her all day long. Still imagine what she'd say if she were here."

A warm wind blew gently down the street, prickling against my face and stinging my eyeballs. I squeezed my eyes shut tight to keep another stupid tear from leaking out.

The man cleared his throat. "Why don't you tell me about who you miss, and I'll tell you who I miss?"

So I told him about my dad. And he told me about his wife, Eldee Mae, who'd passed away several years ago. And as he talked about this woman he loved—and missed—the light in his eyes reminded me of good and shining things in the world: wishing stars and Christmas morning and a winning hockey goal. It's like he sparkled, somehow, when he talked about her. I'm way too young to be in love or whatever. But I do believe some people heap so much joy and happiness into your life—just by being there—that they sparkle. And they make you sparkle too, somehow. They make you want to shine. Sometimes you can tell when a

person has been loved wonderfully well. I could tell Eldee had loved Oliver in such a way. And it was nice to hear him talk about her.

So I guess Oliver and I met because we had sadness in common. Maybe sometimes that kind of shared sadness makes the world feel even darker, lonelier. But that day, having somebody to share my heart with felt like a burst of light. And the fog seemed to evaporate a little, the fog in the street and the fog in my head.

"I'm Jonah Pickett," I told him, and stretched out my hand to shake his.

"I'm Oliver Weatherly." His grin was so big it tipped his white mustache at the ends.

"I wish I could keep talking with you, but I need to help out my mom this morning. I'm doing Ramblin' Rose's nails. It's a job I take very seriously."

"That's a fine way to make a little extra cash," Oliver said.

"Oh, I don't get paid." I shrugged. "Mom offered, but I like just helping her out. I like talking to people and hanging out in there. Keeps my mind busy, too. I mean, she already gives me allowance. And it's not like I buy anything besides ice cream and comic books."

"A fine combination," Oliver said, studying me carefully. "So . . . you enjoy helping your mom out just because?"

I nodded.

Oliver's whole face wrinkled in a grin. "You might be just the man I've been looking for, Jonah Pickett."

"For what?" Now, I know it sounds kind of dumb, but actually being called a man and not a kid made me sit up a little taller. And wish my voice was a little deeper.

"How are you at keeping secrets?" Oliver asked.

"Okay," I said. "But I do tell my mom everything."

Oliver nodded. "Of course, of course. But you and your mom can keep a secret?"

I smiled. "I'm great with secrets."

"Hey-yo!" Oliver clapped. He lowered his voice. "Then I'm going to tell you something. Oliver is not the only name I answer to. Sometimes . . . folks call me The Beedle."

I refused to blink. I stared directly at his old, wrinkly face, wondering, first, if he was real and, second, if he might magically evaporate. The Beedle! In Midnight Gulch, The Beedle was a bigger deal than Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny and the pink chicken that people

claim they see on Valentine's Day. (Actually, I've never heard anybody mention the pink chicken besides Day Grissom. But I figure it's worth noting.)

"You are THE Beedle?" I nearly yelled at Oliver. "Are you real?!"

He chuckled. "Plenty real, but not nearly as spry as I used to be. Now, it all started with Eldee Mae. Sweet Eldee was a traveling preacher until the day we fell in love. That's when she decided it was time to stay in one place and see how she could help the folks around here. But she wanted to help people anonymously, you see—take no credit for it. So we came up with 'The Beedle' . . . our code name for anonymous, do-gooder missions. Mostly, we figured out how people needed helping by keeping our ears and eyes open. And eventually we started pulling in other people to help us get things done . . . which brings me to you."

I swallowed hard. "Me?"

Oliver nodded. "I'm getting old, you see. I can't keep Beedle-ing forever. I've been thinking it's time to take on an apprentice, of sorts. Help a new Beedle take over. What do you think?"

"Just like that?" I asked. "I mean, you barely know me . . . and you want me to be the Beedle?"

"Yes." He nodded matter-of-factly. "Young man, I've got good instincts. I've built a fine business and a good life, because I know in my head—and in my heart—when a thing is meant to be. When I know, I know. So what do you say?"

I didn't take any time to think about what he was asking. I know some decisions are the kind you sleep on or ponder about or whatever. But I think some opportunities are so awesome you need to jump on them as fast as you can. "I say absolutely," I told him.

"Then hey-yo and here we go." He grinned. "I hereby declare that you, Jonah Pickett, are the Beedle."

*

I'm a bit ashamed to admit it but, at first, I did Beedle deeds because I thought, maybe, if I did enough good deeds, more goodness would bounce back to me. Like, if I kept doing good things all the time, my dad would come home fine. If I could just be good enough, I could make everything right.

But that is NOT how life works. Good and kind people deal with crummy circumstances every day.

They still get sick. They still move away. They still lose people they love. The world is full of goodness, and it's also full of sad and tragic circumstances.

"You know what makes me feel really bad?" I asked Oliver one day while we plotted Beedle missions in his library. "Sometimes I wonder . . . why did *he* have to go. I mean, there are lots of soldiers. And some of them don't have kids. So why did my dad have to be the one that goes overseas? And then I think, somebody loves all those men and women, too. Somebody's waiting for them at home . . . you know? So why not him? I just . . . ugh." I flicked open the newspaper.

"I've wondered about similar things. I don't know a person who hasn't. But questions like that will gnaw at your heart until there's nothing left," Oliver told me. "There're things I'll never make peace with." He wiped his glasses. "But here's what I don't regret in the end: choosing love instead of hate. Choosing hope instead of bitterness."

So then I started doing Beedle-deeds to keep my mind engaged. I still missed my dad, but having good deeds to plot and plan helped take up enough brain space that I didn't have quite as much time to worry. I

mean, I still worried. But it didn't gnaw at me like it used to.

But then, eventually, I did Beedle deeds because . . . well, because I liked seeing people smile. I loved to see people happy. My granny Effie told me I had a "know-how," a way of figuring out how to help people. But *knowing* how to do something kind and actually *doing* something kind . . . those are two different things. Being the Beedle gave me a way to make the know-how matter. It was mostly while I worked at Mom's beauty shop that I came up with ideas to help.

When I heard the St. John family was having a hard time because the dad got laid off, and they couldn't afford coats for the winter . . . The Beedle left a bundle of new jackets on their porch.

One day I heard that the women's shelter wanted a few new books for kids who stayed there with their moms.

The next week, our town bookstore owner, Valerie, showed up at the shelter with a moving truck full of books. "An entire library!" she cooed. "From The Beedle!"

And then, of course, there was Bo and Roberta Belle. Not too long after Bo'd told Mom his sad news, I was painting Roberta's nails in the shop. Bo read the newspaper nearby, waiting for the oil to get changed in their car. Only a few weeks had passed, but his flannel shirt was already hanging loose on his shoulders.

"So tell me how you met Mr. Belle," I said while I got my detail paintbrushes ready. Miss Roberta had requested cheetah-print nails.

"Well now . . ." She grinned. Her voice grew loud enough so everybody in the shop had to listen. Mom's shop is always crowded. People come with actual appointments, of course. But I think sometimes people just love to be at the shop to hear stories. And to tell stories. Bo didn't look up from his newspaper, but he grinned.

"We were high school sweethearts," Roberta said. "Our first date would have been the springtime dance. *Dance among the Stars!* That was the theme. But the week before the dance, Bo enlisted for war. He knew he had to do it, felt it in his bones and his heart and soul, he said. Lots of young men in Midnight Gulch felt the same way. I'll never forget the day we all stood out there

to say good-bye. Those of us who came out to see our sweethearts go, we all wore our dancing dresses."

Roberta ducked her head at the memory, and a little tear drizzled down her wrinkled cheek. Before I could reach for a tissue, I heard Bo's walker clunking up behind her.

"We never got our dance . . ." Bo said sadly.

Roberta swatted playfully at his arm. "I don't mind that, silly man. I just wanted you back. And you did come back to me."

Bo chuckled and eased down in the chair beside his wife. "I owe you that dance though."

Roberta smiled. "On the night of the dance, I put on my dress, tucked a white rose in my hair, and watched the stars. I listened to our song."

"That's exactly how I imagined you," Bo said, resting his hand on her shoulder.

Roberta fluttered her eyelashes at him. "I promised you I'd never dance with anybody else, Bo Belle. And I never have."

*

The sound of Roberta's car alarm finally results exactly as we'd hoped: Roberta flings open the front door of the shop and hobbles across the street to turn the noise off. Rollers still dangle from her white hair. When she leans into the car to turn off the alarm, she sees a white rose on the dashboard, and a note that reads:

**Bo and Roberta,
It is never too late to dance!
Sincerest Regards,
The Beedle**

Oliver leans over and pushes Play on the boom box, then resumes his hiding place beside the camellias.

As a Patsy Cline song crackles through the speaker, folks trickle out of Mom's shop. The song seems to float in the air; it's a song about traveling the whole world, finally seeing every great and mighty place you ever dreamed of . . . but only ever being able to think about the people you love and miss. I think we all have someone like that, if we're lucky.

Roberta clutches the flower to her chest. She looks up at the twinkling lights and the banner rippling in the easy breeze:

DANCE AMONG THE STARS!

Bo's chin trembles as he looks at the banner . . . and then at his wife, standing in the middle of the street holding a flower. He hobbles toward her.

Click-de-click. Click-de-click. His walker taps out a rhythm on the pavement.

When Bo reaches his wife, he tucks the flower behind her ear.

He gently pushes his walker out of the way and rests his hands on her shoulders, to keep steady. She rests her hands on his waist securely, and they laugh and dance. Everybody's watching them, but it's like they only see each other.

I hear Big Bruce snuffle beside me. I pat him on the shoulder.

Oliver Weatherly holds out his fist. I bump it.

"Pumpernickel," he whispers with a wink.

"Pumpernickel." I grin.

And the three of us move around to the back door of the shop. Bruce and I bid Oliver good-bye and head back inside, so we can sneak through the front door and watch with everybody else, like we've been there all along.

The Beedle also sent invitations to the dance to all former classmates of Bo and Roberta Belle. Several of them made it, and it's fun to see their confused looks as they show up near the shop, invitations in hand. Men press their hats over their hearts. Ladies smile and take pictures with their phones. Occasionally Bo and Roberta wave and call out to friends nearby. To my great delight, several couples join in the dance. I take a picture with my phone to send Oliver.

And then I see my mom, watching Bo and Roberta. Tears fall down her pretty face, but she's smiling. I make my way over beside her and take her hand. I mean, I'm not a little kid. Maybe it's weird to want to hold your mom's hand when you're twelve and not two. But she squeezes my hand tight and smiles down at me.

The hope blooms so thick between us that I'm sure my dad can feel it, a million miles away, on the other side of the ocean. Maybe he's dreaming about us right this second. Maybe miles are nothing between two people when love is in the mix.

Someone taps my shoulder. It's Bo, holding tight to his walker. Roberta hugs my mom and says something

to her. And Bo slips a note into my hand and speaks low so nobody can hear him except me.

"I've noticed you're always nearby when good things happen."

My heart freezes. Does he know my secret? Was I not covert enough in my attempts to do good? Was the Beedle found out?

Bo clutches his hand tight over mine. "I am hoping . . . maybe you've seen the Beedle in action, a time or two. Maybe you've figured out who it is. If so . . . make sure he . . . or she . . . gets this message for me?"

"Yes, Sir," I promise, breathing easy again.

The Belles settle on Abigail's bench, and watch their friends dance and laugh into the light of the fading sun. I unfold the note and scan Bo's words:

To The Beedle,

I hope this ain't imposing, but I didn't know who else to ask.

Once I'm gone, I need to see to it that my wife gets a bouquet of white roses twice a year, every year, until she's passed on. See that she gets them on our anniversary, June the eleventh, and on the date of May

the fifteenth—which would have been our high school dance. Please attach this note:

***For Ro,
For all our dancing days,
and until we dance again.***

***Love,
Bo***

I thank you kindly for your help, Beedle.

The feeling in my chest when I read that . . . I don't even know how to describe it. It's that feeling when love and sadness push so hard against each other that it hurts. It made me want to tell everybody I love just how much I love them.

"Pumpnickel," I whisper softly. And I watch the Belles climb in their car and drive away, underneath their prom banner and into the setting sun.

*

Later on, Mom and Big Bruce take down the banner and pick up the traffic cones. I'm rereading Bo's letter when a rickety noise catches my attention. It's a van ambling down the road, and it makes a sound like somebody's dragging a cluster of cans over pavement. The van is the color of rusted snot.

Mom notices the van too—few things call to her like the siren song of screechy brakes or stopped-up mufflers in need of repair. "Oh! I'll bet that's Cleo Harness's family. You remember the other day when she was in here asking you to look out for her niece at school? What was her name?"

"Felicity," I say, as the van disappears down the road in a cloud of hazy dust.

Felicity.

As I say her name, something strange falls over me. Something like static electricity, tingling against my skin. I might as well have spoken a magic word into the air.

I've always believed names are powerful things. Seeing the girl in the van only confirms my theory.

Because I say the name Felicity, and something new blooms up inside my chest.

Something like magic.

Something like hope.

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