

Chapter TWO

Once*Beauty and Beast – the languor of Lady Le Prince*

She made her way unto the screen with flickers of sepia like an old photo. She starts off indistinct but develops slowly into a sharp, clear and most alluring image. This was her story- the story of beauty and beast.

*She walks in beauty like the night
Of Cloudless climes and starry skies
And all that's best of dark and light
Meet in her aspect and her eyes*

- Lord Byron

The folklore of the West Indies is as dense as its forest. There was one tale however that imparted faith to a girl-child. It was, as I promised, a Beauty and Beast tale, but it may have happened that it turned out somewhat differently than you expected. Dreams have a funny way of changing things. They layer nebulous films over the other, obscuring and altering as a result. They diminish the precise veracity of what exactly happened but often in doing so, they hit upon some greater truth.

Mademoiselle LePrince lived with her family on the island at a strange time. Slavery had ended but there was still a great divide, as workers continued to serve as the machinery that sustained the big house. Toil in the field: toil in the never-ending sun. The fields are full of salty sweat and sweet sugar. Man's back is bent. Shall he go down on all fours or does he possess some organic humanity that we have lost? The sugar cane stands tall and proud like an army waiting to be conquered. They are emerald denizens of these lands and their leaves may seem downy with a thin, soft, white layer of fur but these jaded leaves can cut like whip marks on your back.

Elle's eyes were partially screened from the world outside by the antique curtains. She peeked through that window: a portico and a garrison to the world outside. She observed the peculiar way that the leaves picked up some glint of silver and shimmered in the sun as they thrashed about in a West Indian breeze. She had seen this before, on a wide ocean where the spangled water waved with the tides. She had crossed a sea because of the father she loved. There was nothing she would not do for him. She was the youngest daughter and they called her a beauty. Living in a house in France with her father and two sisters was a settled and peaceful existence for her contented childhood.

Though they lived in a splendour bequeathed to them by their ancestors, the house was always threatened with impending misfortune and heartache as the unwelcome visitors consistently outnumbered the guests. The debt collectors infiltrated their sanctuary and sat in the fine dining room and sipped tea in blue and white cups. Elle served them tea in her mother's finest china and they swallowed mouthfuls and stuck their nostrils in leather bound volumes that logged her family's decline. Her father had a charming ease and assured them with a wave of his golden hand. She made no comment but slowly poured the tea scanning the books. After the infestation of these uninvited persons subsided, she sat next to her father and expressed her worry and dread but he would kiss her sweet forehead and tell the child to think no more on the matter but amuse herself with more innocent indulgences and make the most of a fleeting childhood.

Her father had always possessed a singular ease. He seemed unrushed by the pressures of this world. What panic could these dark suited men bring, when he already buried the woman he loved? Mightier hands had beggared him. He fought to keep her but fate had spun a sinister campaign and now these men tried to threaten him with mere talk of gold. Elle would share long walks with her father as he caricatured the men in exaggerated expressions of concern. Her smiles were only intensified when they reached the ancient patch of white roses. She adored them and would force her father to repeat the story of how her mother would run her fingers along their petals, in some ancestral ritual. She felt part of some inexorable chain among these fragile, white roses that had outlasted

generations. She would not notice the look of fear in her father's eyes like that of a hunted man. The biting wind made her cling to her fleece as they sauntered out of the garden.

There are things you accept as a child because you have never known it to be any other. Her mother was dead and she had never thought about the circumstances surrounding it. She knew that her father never talked about it and that it would be futile to ask the neighbours because they knew even less of it than she did. They had moved into this ancient house after her mother's death and while she was still too young to remember. Now her sisters entertained suitors and she could almost fit into her mother's old dresses. Her sisters were always locked in their own world with their secrets and whispers that would hush as she entered the room. As a child she never minded too much because she had her father but now she felt more indignant. After all, was she not almost the same age as her mother was when she had married?

Her sisters would go dancing at night and amble into their room at the first sign of morning. Her father had less time to spend with his child and she would wander around the house into the attic. She relished her mother's accoutrements as her playthings and one day she fitted herself in a sapphire gown of her mother's and she arranged her hair piled high on her crown and as she appraised herself in the mirror she was sure that she conveyed the impression of a fine lady. She swayed down the stairs and into the sitting room, sure that she would enjoy much praise but through the doorway she could see her sisters seated with their father. He looked serious and starkly white and her usually twittering sisters sunk into their seats, sulking into each other's arms. His countenance betrayed some acute trepidation and Elle worried about her father's fortune. How was she to know that he had loftier, darker and more disturbing concerns lining his brow? Not long after they were on a long journey to a strange and far away land. Like mariners they crossed an ancient sea and settled into a Big House in a virgin land.

The Big House is an omnipotent figure overlooking the fields. It is the stuff of Gods. The varnished flaws shine radiant and ready to reflect the halos of the Le Prince girls who live here, safe in their father's castle. The crystal sparkles clear and clean. It is from a far off place and seems otherworldly in this primal, virgin land. The crystal is transparent. You get what you see. But the chandelier is a series of prisms and there are multiple reflections as Elle comes of age, descending a wearying spiral staircase. The crystal chandelier divides her into many girls. All are very beautiful. She is the Beauty within and as she runs her finger over the petals of a pure white frangipani flower in an arrangement on the table, she feels the velvet softness and the texture of perfection.

Last night had been a perfect affair unfolding like one of those immaculate blooms. Appetisers, entrées, smoking in the cigar room and dancing in the grand hall followed in a sequence as the marks of true civilisation unfolded. It was as if scripted. Girls curtsyed and smiled innocently and alluringly and laughed at the silly jokes of fat little men in their overstuffed coats: the whole of civilisation locked up in one Big House. This had been the petit ball, foreshadowing the grand ball that was to come in a matter of weeks.

Elle found herself shifting into some being she did not know herself to be: she did not know existed beyond the pages of lore and myth. That long journey had seen her come to age and with it she reaped a legacy that her father could not understand and that her mother was not left to prepare her for. She felt so spent. She was drained by the very heat of the day and she drifted. Her father was mostly gone, attending to some business affair and her sisters would lock themselves in behind a mahogany door. She was left to discover this mystifying new land with its strange temptations and encroaching languor. As she draped a glittering cape over her bare shoulders on the night of the petit ball, she felt somewhat awakened by those drums outside.

The parties were unforgettable. The dresses of the women were ornate and the women themselves were frosted cakes melting slowly in the Caribbean warmth. The bonfires of the yard kept the mosquitoes away and they blazed like hellfire itself. Frantic music

played in the yard and the workers sung in broken French. The guests arrived in coaches and tails. There was the smell of sweet French perfume of the ladies mixed with voodoo from the hills. Things were said to appear on nights like these and the visiting aristocracy felt a thrill and excitement by this. The world was volatile and everyone felt it. It sent at once a shudder of fear and a shiver of excitement. They are largely the same thing.

The morning after was long and lazy for the wealthy families. They sat on their porches and sipped limejuice and nursed their headaches. The Leprince women were on their wicker lounges. The nanny was fanning herself and her three girls flanked her. The Leprince girls were all grown now. They were young ladies and now in this wild, distant place the youngest had come to know the secret of her sisters, an ancestry and herself. The girls conveyed a lingering lethargy in these daylight hours that most attributed to their unfamiliarity with the Caribbean sun. They had travelled the oceans to this their home. Like Angels they tread over the fields. The stalks were turgid and filled with sweet sugar. Elle had a languor that made her seem even more the ingénue. She was pale and waiflike. She had an unmistakable delicacy. That fragility made her all the more fascinating as she was less a real human than an apparition of beauty. She was like a petal threatening at any moment to be blown away in the breeze. Her dress, a white muslin concoction, may well have emerged from a confectioners shop. Sweat made her sticky but she was frosted with sweet talc. There the sisters sat shaded from the sun on this veranda of the Big House. Their father was away on some urgent business affair, as he most often was, and the girls were left alone in their Big House with many servants and many pretty things to amuse them.

Their Big House was a singular pillar of this world. It was as imposing as it was white and gleaming in the West Indian sun: a real monument to the power of a few. The house was tellingly positioned over the land beneath with only wooden walls to separate it from the untamed fields and jungle land flanking it. The smell of the herbs from the hillsides came rolling down in wonderful wafts. There was the smell of *chadon beni* as it is called on the island. They grow close to the ground in the crevices of mossy rocks near the miniature waterfalls of the hillside. The hillsides were steep and lush and lavishly

carpeted in green. They jotted out of the landscape and flanked the horizon of the plantation. No matter where you went in the horizon would be these hills. There is only so far you can run on an island. There are strange and wild tales of these hills. They have threatening tribes of escaped slaves who had mated with the few surviving natives of the island.

Elle had been sent here on a long winding journey across an Atlantic and a great invisible barrier that separated two worlds. She was the favourite daughter and when her father's fortunes had faded she asked only for a single and pure white rose. He had gotten it for her but at a cost and Elle had torn secrets of her own. She was wrapped up and shipped away along with her sisters and a secret. There were clandestine events that were beginning to happen in France and Elle bore the weight of a beast of an unguessable ancestral curse. She must be sent to a gated world far away where she would enjoy luxury and solitude and where she would be protected from the harsh knowing of those that would harm her. It was all for her own good, as these things mostly are.

This was the land of rolling hills of sugar cane and sweet juice for the taking. Men worked in these fields. Their bodies turned to machines or beasts. They were dark sweaty shadows in the sun arched their backs, planting, cutting, harvesting, and clearing the field. These were days before the factories, as we know it. Man had to sustain the lifestyles of their owners. Man was bought and sold as cattle or sheep. He was property. Of course he was duly tended to. There was fodder and food and shelter. These men had been saved from the uncivilised jungles of darkest continents and brought to this corner of the world. They were in paradise. Adam had dominion over them all. Eve was a beauty. They were trapped in this paradise and like the flocks of the air or herds on the land they must find their place. Species, Classification, Animal, Genus. There is man: sweaty, carnal, ferocious man.

Beauty and Beast: Two separate banks on the same stream. The water is murky in that river as it erodes its sides and washes away the sanctity of your belief. Elle strolled over a dusty path, under a white lace parasol. She felt faint and in a constant and overwhelming

state of distraction. Last night had wearied her. Some mighty proboscis was lodged in her side. She could feel it draining her strength and replacing it with a succour of acceptance at what she had become. Her eyes scanned the fields and her body felt strangely not her own. She notices the eyes of a man on her. He is lithe and though he beats the spade in a restrained rhythm he conveys the exact impression of an organic fluidity that she has long forgotten. This is not the civilised being. This is not the gentleman. No, this is man in his purest and darkest form. His essence has been distilled and it is not found to be the soul or the angel but he shares more with the beast of the field. The same blood and desires are pumped through his heart. That heart beats. I have seen the heart of a cow once. It is a large and red and messy thing. The heart of a man is no different. It has the same functions and uses. What use is it to make an angel of a beast? Giving a buffalo wings?

Elle dropped another crystal into her tea. Tea from far off lands- exotic tea and what of this sugar? Crystals, magic, sweet. The very stuff of dreams and imaginings. She was a tired girl. She was pale and unaccustomed to this daylight. This world was unfamiliar. It was new. It exhilarated her though. She found its very crudity picturesque. The hardwood floors of her bedroom entranced her almost as much as seeing the trees from which they came. The evenings approached and with them came some renewed vigour. She had inherited from her ancestors, a legacy. She had come with the promise of a whole, dark burden. This lighthearted girl with a sweet smile was elevated above the world around. She had wings: Angel-girl above the dirty world. She hovers. She is not part of this. She is blessed to be eternally separated from the filth around. So it seems. She is in the Big House. There is a divide. Her windows overlook fields and men and sugar canes.

Her window is large and guarded. Be careful with your hair. Those outsiders may climb through your window and then what will you do with them? Wash your hands before supper. Be rid of the dirt of the world sweet Ella. Your feast awaits you. Shall it be on fine china with silverware too? The girl is locked safely in her tower. She is protected from the evils of the world. Her fathers have built her walls to protect her. The talisman shall keep you safe. Her fathers have locked her in. The protected and the prisoner. She is safe but she is not harmless.

The Caribbean night comes. The sun is so bright here that when night falls it is the darkest night one has ever seen. It is quiet. It is peaceful, a land of many trees and dark nights and safe little girls and mosquitoes. So many mosquitoes. They swarm about in strange spirals. They are the most deadly beasts on these islands and they are so small that they can find their way in your home. They are waiting to suck your blood. Be careful Elle. Swat them and scarlet may stain that white muslin shawl. Red blood on that white shall. It will not easily wash off. It will glare at you and shriek like the bite itself.

The girl is draped in white. She is purity. She is the virginal laughter of the plantation. Her languor is marked. She is a fragile thing, a mere wisp of gossamer floating on the breeze. She is sweet. Ancient drapes hang in her room, protecting her from the glare of a thousand eyes and from the intensity of that sun. These are antique drapes brought with her from far off lands. They are thick velvet shrouding the body of this girl. She is veiled from the world. All is safe.

The men in the field are virile creatures. They are beasts at work. What happens when one rainy evening one of them is still tending to the donkeys and hears a piercing scream? Does he rush to the rescue of the girl that is thrown off her bleeding horse? Does he hold the fragile unconscious moth in his hands and take her up to the house? Does he fall in love?

Her eyes met his as she awoke and found herself in his arms. This was Fatum. Had she not seen those eyes from her window? This was the man she had seen, the one at work in the fields. The tenderness the touch of these strong hairy arms was immense. It seemed to protect her in a way she has never felt before. She was held like a child, like a little plaything and taken up to the steps of the house. Evening fell darker and deeper. The sky erupted. Heavy clouds hung like full nursing breasts. They fed the world. She was covered in the rain of the heavens. He was amazed at her beauty. It was all a scene from a romance novel. But where was this love affair to lead when she coming to her senses struggled out of those arms and ran into the house- into the Big House. Her exquisite face

warned him to stay away. She shut the great door separating herself from that world of fields and men and beasts...bleeding beasts.

The life on the plantation is murky at night. There are torches but they burn out and all becomes piercingly dark. That is the way of this world, this unfamiliar world. These girls are on the margins in a world that is itself separate from civilisation. Oceans and waters and shores divide this earth from the world of old but legacies persist. Did they think they would find peace here? Was this new land an escape? These fragile girls. Sisters. Ella alone in her dripping wet white dress. Her bleeding horse left in a field somewhere, her heart pumping blood. Had he seen it in her eyes? The change. Oh if not for the change. If only she could be that wax doll. If only she could be the beautiful plaything and the angel. Her wings would be sugary confections. Right now all wet and white she looked like sweet syrup. The blood on her sleeve was darkening now. It was like molasses tainting the purity. She wanted so badly to run to her dead mother and cry tears, long never-ending tears that held the burden of the world. She wanted to be this enfant once more; beautiful little enfant all sugared and angelic. But her eyes show a dark light. There is something in them that is not quite right. She has a secret. She is part of a clan of something darker than any of these men could ever understand.

Her caged bird sings in the corner of her room. Its tones are dulcet and melancholy at the same time. It was a bloody tale but these were the savage legacies of the island that tempting Elle had now found herself in. Long gone were the French parlours. This was the land of brutal hills and locked doors.

That beast of the field goes to tend to the horse. It must be put down and killed. He wades through the muck and mud. He is covered in the filth of this rainy night. The earth has spewed up its insides and he wades through these entrails. When your feet sink deeper the mud is warm. There is a vitality to it. It imparts it to him and makes his way in one motion with the innards of the earth. Is he going to sink? Will he be sucked in? These are questions he does not ask. The rain blinds him. He is set in motion and must continue.

The striking girl is safe inside her handsome room. She knows what she has felt but there are many dark desires that must be suppressed. One must regain control. One must regain control. It is a mantra unto herself. Her heart beats it. She must become calm once more. If she can last this night it will be over. Daylight will come and she can forget all this. Yes daylight comes and she peers through the slit between her heavy curtains. There is the man at work. She wants nothing more in that instant than to be out in the sunshine clearing the fields but she must retire now to indoor amusements and exert no effort or will. She looks down once more only to see eyes watching her. She quickly moves away and the image of the eyes of the beautiful girl through the drapes is gone.

A bird is perched on a nearby tree. It is bright yellow and it shrieks to the sunlight. It champions something. Its voice will not be denied.

The evening drew close and the fields set ablaze. This is where we began. The fires. These were larger Bonfires spreading through the land. Fire is used to clear the field of its very last remains. Hell fire blazing those fields. What will be left tomorrow but ashes and soot and dark stubs? But tonight passion blazes and the fire moves in waves consuming all in its path. It is a funny thing how fire can seem so fluid, like hell water spreading to the earth. Rain may have fallen but the fields burn easily enough. The little sugar canes left behind are blazed like torches and then scorched to hell.

The night sky is dark and smoke moves up like mist. The air is misty and one can hardly see. The fire burns as though the sun fell to the earth. Guests in all their finery make their way up to the Big House. There is a part away from the fire. Moses parting the Red Sea. The guests reach the house. They are all masked, a crowd of people with hidden faces. They have something to hide? The masquerade is fine. Oh the beauty of it all. The women are in lavish gowns and the men in tails. Their faces are jewelled and their costumes lavish like at a Venetian ball. One is in a jester's hat and many in pearl-rimmed masks. It is sublime. The music is mellow and the guests escorted in to the grand hall. This is luxury at its finest. Polished floors and candelabras impart a soft ethereal glow to

all that enter. Refreshments are served. Glasses of wine capture the reflected glow of the evening. Someone is singing in the corner. She is a bird trapped indoors. The chandelier is crystal and its prisms capture a hundred smiling faces all behind embossed masks. The door opens to let in another guest.

The music is frantic outside and the workers engage in merriment of their own. They mock the people indoors and secretly long to be a part of it all. The women dance in long white cotton skirts. They hold the edges up and twirl in the breeze. The material flutters and they seem like winged creatures. The men dodge and weave between them. They drink rum distilled from the sugar cane. They get drunk and merry. The voodoo of the hills swarms down. The old Obeah Woman blesses and chants. She moves around the fires and stares into the flames as though she were having a vision. She chants some song and calls for more rum. The young kitchen women danced with their partners from the field. They are glad to be outside. The fresh air revitalises them. The ashes waft over from the fire. It forms a cloud of darkness but is soon gone. One young man is in a corner under a tree. He cranes his neck to a window upstairs. That is the window of the girl he had saved. Will she drop down her hair? He would gladly climb and free the fragile child. She is a beauty. He cannot forget.

He has volunteered to carry provisions to the kitchen in the hope of catching a glimpse of his belle. This young man of the fields is now inside. He sees through the open doors of the kitchen into the dining hall. There are the fine clothed guests. He notices that he has tracked mud indoors and hastily wipes his feet. His leather boots are filthy and worn. They have a past attached to them. They tell of an intimate relationship with the earth. He tries to brush them off best as he can. Feeling another presence in the room he looks up and there is an angel before him. She is dressed in gold and white. Feathers frame her mask as though they were collected from heaven itself. He sees those piercing eyes staring at him. He is at a loss.

She beckons with a tilt of her head and the muddy field hand follows her up the stairs. He enters her room and she begins kissing him. There is the whisper of love in the perfumed

air of that room. He holds her safely in an embrace tasting her breath. She is the sleeping beauty and his sweaty arms clinch her. She is not trapped. She is released.

Looking into his eyes there is a pained look in hers, one of anxiety and fear. But it is not him that she fears ...it is mostly herself.

She undoes the ribbon to the back of her mask slowly as though she were still labouring over the decision. The white and gold thing falls off. He looks his beauty in her eyes and at her face and mouth and teeth. The man of the fields pulls sharply away. Horror strikes over his expression. She cowers into the corner into the darkness, she truly a beast. A creature of the night behind that mask lies like a predator in wait for some unassuming prey. It is not her fault. It is just her nature. It is the secret of the girl behind the antique velvet curtains. She has inherited this affliction of sorts. It haunts her. She cannot escape or evade it.

There the young man stands. He is a beauty of this world. Finely formed in body and expression of some real vitality that never belonged to this girl. How could it? She was never allowed. So here he was, this beauty: sold off to the Beast of a distant land. Did his father lose him at a game of cards? He comes face to face with this creature. What will he do? What will she? Have their fates been metered out to them by circumstance? Fatum. Destiny has brought them here in this room. Or has their confrontation cheated destiny. She was never meant to lower her mask. Her sisters feed in a nearby room on guests that they enticed into empty rooms. They will never be accepted, never be allowed into the light of day.

They had begun to attack in France and their appetites could not be attended to quickly enough. They had gone on a nightly ritual rampage, luring strange young men and sucking them dry. The girls were sent away to this dark place in hope that they would find some peace. Their father had tried to protect them and they struggled to escape their urges that he knew Elle would be indoctrinated into, urges that destroyed her mother. But it is only so long that you can resist what you truly are.

This girl has left the door slightly open. She has provided the path for her prey to escape. Her head is bent to her own bosom. Her fangs press against her own skin. The boy suddenly moves. She expects a blow. How could she see this coming? His arms wrap around her lovingly. His eyes question her. He wipes the drapes aside so he can see her for herself. In the moonlight he sees the face of the beast. He feels her heart beat strong and cannot miss the very passion in her eyes. He presses himself close to her and urges her to bite. She complies biting the savage. She is the dark one. Her teeth savour him for an instant. He unlocks the window there they go hand in hand past the burning fields and through the hell fire. They make their way to the wild green overgrown hills. There is no sugar cane here. There is only deepest darkest jungle. She is finally safe.

All that is left are torn curtains and the drips of blood down the side of the great, white Big House. The story will become legend of the poor girl who was stolen to the hills by a savage, brutal man. But you and I both know that myth is not meant to be trusted.