

Stacy's Star

I do not particularly like my grandmother—especially when she says, “Let’s go for a walk.” My feet ache, I don’t want to get up; I want to stay right here. “Enough with the games,” she says, “come on. Let’s go.”

“Why?” I ask her. “Where are we going?”

“Outside.” She says. “To get fresh air. And rest your eyes a little.” She is at the threshold, ready for departure. “Come now, hurry.”

“But it’s polluted out there.” I protest, unable to get on my feet. I just want to spread my legs and doze like an otter. “What’s out there that deems special attention and worthiness? Why are you so insistent about going for a walk? Aren’t you a diabetic?”

“If you don’t come with me, you’ll die.”

I laugh. “Says who?”

“Says God.”

I scoff. “Please, don’t bring God into this. Just tell me why I should go?”

“Because you need to; I have something to show you.”

“What is it?” I say, ears perking up. “Is it outside?”

“It is.”

“What is it?”

“Not now.” My grandmother says, “It’s a secret,” and walks out. I follow her. A cool breeze ruffles my blonde hair styled in a pigtail, shifting it like wheat. The sodium-arc light pulsates with glowing orange hue, and spills onto the sidewalk as if enveloped in a benign, imprint of autumn leaves. Normally, roaches will dart along the asphalt like miniature jet-skis—but, for the first time, they remain in a kind of apathetic stupor, lying languidly, antennas rotating into the twilight like a cruise-ship; they stir not once.

They don't seem at all bothered. One disappears under the soles of my shoe, and I hear a loud crunch. But the six legged creature reemerges untouched, as I do the hokey-pokey, inhaling, exhaling, in whoosh of deep breaths. I can hear the steady footsteps of my grandmother, dragging her slippers like an amputee, and I wonder how she plans on carrying herself back home, under these conditions.

"Are you okay, grandma? Need any help?"

"It's nothing" She replies, waving me away as if I was a mosquito.

Nothing my ass, I think. "Looks like you're hurting." Her face has a sour, pinched look.

"No." She huffs. "Stop worrying about me. Worry about yourself."

"I told you not to eat so much fish burgers and coffee at McDonald, didn't I? Want me to carry you on my back? I'll do it, if you want me to. You're probably lighter than a quarter." I say, and then add as an afterthought: "Really. You should be thankful. You're lucky to even have your eyesight."

My grandmother rolls her eyes.

"Hell—I'll even cut that foot off for you, if the going gets rough. What do you say?"

She appears shocked.

"Just tell me when," I quip, cheerfully. "Nurse, can you hand me that scalpel and saw?"

Coming right up, Doc."

She smacks me hard across the back. I feel nothing.

A car passes by, its yellow beams cutting through the darkness like a spear probing for open flesh. We illuminate and dissolve back into our milieu. Oak, spruce, and ferns line the sidewalk like mourners milling around a tombstone. Each house consists of different floras and vegetation; and we pass a weeping willow, a sad forlorn figure arched with hanging limbs which tickle our hair. We giggle.

The branches—they whisper. Across the street, two cars are parked bumper to bumper, engines running, and a driver of the two shifts his eyes, a joint in one hand, and a baggie in the other, lurking.

“Pretend like that never happened, grandma.”

She disappears. She is not there. For a woman her age, she must be an Olympic athlete. She has already covered fifty paces, hobbling on one foot. I am amazed as I try to catch up... but feel as if I'm walking underwater.

“Wait, up! Are you on steroids?” I say. “Jesus, how the hell—”

She isn't paying attention. Her eyes are looking elsewhere.

“Do you see that?” she whispers, brunette eyes fogging up like milky cataracts.

“See what?”

“That.” She says again, pointing to a house across the street. I slow down, and brush up against my grandmother. It is a huge, two-story house, with a roof that sags like an underbelly, and tall hedges that grows in thickets to complement the withered front lawn, all dried and scrunched up like brown paper bag mashed together in patches. The house appears abandoned. But queasy feeling gnaws at my inside as if I should *know* this house, and I had been here years before. I shrug off the feeling the way we shrug off bad dreams.

“Who lives there?” I ask grandma. “It looks so familiar.”

“It does, doesn't it?” She testifies with a faint smile. “A girl named Stacey used to live there.”

“What happened to her?”

“Her boyfriend found out she was cheating on him. He drowned her in scalding, hot water—in her own bathtub.”

“Why?”

“Because, he couldn't accept the fact... she was so different.”

“No,” I ask. “Why boiling, hot water? Why couldn't he just drown her?”

“Because he was furious.”

“How old was Stacey?”

“Thirteen. Only thirteen”

“Thirteen?” I ask, unperturbed.

“Yes, it's a shame. She was a remarkable child too.”

“Where were her parents?”

“Out for dinner.”

“And they didn’t come back?”

“They didn’t know. It was too late, when they did.”

“But they leave a thirteen-year-old child, all alone, to fend for herself?”

To that, grandma gave no response.

“Did they catch the killer?”

“Yes, they caught him, but since he was under the age of eighteen when he committed the violent act, he was tried as a juvenile.” My grandmother reflects. “He’ll be granted parole, soon.”

“No way! Hope he rots in jail.”

“Me too.”

“Wait—how do you know all this?” I ask, something not adding up, the inconsistencies coming together.

“Someone told me.”

“Someone told you?”

“At noon, whenever the moon comes up like now, you can see her shadowy figure—”

“Please, just stop with another one of your haunted house stories.”

“She was killed... in that house.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“But why?”

“For Christ-sake!” I exclaim, nettled like a thorn in my side. “Because, there’s no such thing as ghosts! It’s that simple!”

“But it’s true.”

“If it’s true, why is there a light shining from inside the house? It looks like there’s someone in there.”

“What are you talking about?” She says a little flustered. “What light? I don’t see any light.”

“The one over there... You don’t see it?”

“No.”

“Oh my god,” My mouth hangs open, and my jaw comes unhinged like a gaping garage door to reveal two tarnished teeth. I feel a sudden chill race along the back of my spine. “It was right there. A light was shining from inside that house—I swear to God, Grandma.”

“*Don’t* speak of the Lord’s name in vain.”

“I wasn’t. Why do you keep bringing him into the picture?”

“We will eventually meet him.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” I say, in disbelief. “Who’s brainwashed you now? Fine. I swear on my mother’s grave.”

“Your mother is alive.”

“I swear on *my* grave,” I raise my right hand, “I cross my heart, and hope to die. You feel better? Jesus, grandma—why is it so hard for you to believe me?”

“I believe you.”

“No, you don’t. You only pretend you do. I’ll prove it.”

And with that, I amble across the street towards the occupied house. It looms before me like a monolithic turret, rising in the gloom like a sage palm. Every step closer to the front lawn steps brings a jittery discomfort in my feet and hands like a wave of rolling electricity. My heart thuds against my ribs. The lump in my throat refuses to dissolve no matter how much I swallow. This is my death-spot, and I know it.

What are you doing? My brain yammers ceaselessly. Are you crazy? Get back! Get back while you still have time!

But I was already on the front steps, and I was lazy to go back now. I don’t *want* to go back, for there is something—some kind of a binding force which drives me onward, like a car set on auto-cruise. Something glimmering from beneath the muddy water like a flash of gold. I leap over the side-gate with limber ease, with almost cat-like precision. I can go straight through, but who wants to wake the dogs? This little alleyway connects to the backyard; and as I creep alongside the faded

exterior of the painted side walls, I not only notice the windows set high up above the divider, but the faint light filtering through it also. My grandmother is wrong.

Someone *is* living here. I spot movement behind the windows.

Who? Who could possibly live here? I wonder aloud, and realize I have gone through this same exact motion in my dreams, years before. Impossible but true. Me straining to look through the stained glass window; me pawing away the grubby veneer of dust and soot in circular motion, and peering in the dimly lit restroom of the two story house with mushrooming terror and dread; it all feels like déjà vu.

A tub reclines at the far end of the corner. The peach colored shower curtains are pulled back to reveal a hodgepodge of shampoo and conditioner and body cleanser, as the overhead fluorescent bulbs flicker on and off. The water runs in a constant babble, filling to the brim, as curls of steam rise and hiss to the top like smokestacks under a chimney.

A man is giving the boy a bath. The boy's lobster skin is already breaking out in sores and lesions, as he thrashes and writhes in the scalding, hot water like a broken kelp... like a spider squirming under the squirt of Black Flag. His screams are inhuman. It pitches and rolls like hot tea kettle. He comes up for breath only once. And when he does his pus filled eyes stares back at me, hauntingly.

Those eyes... they look eerily like mine.

Then they go under for the last time, his so called boyfriend keeping him submerged, wearing nothing but a pair of kitchen sink gloves, for more than ten minutes. I muffle a scream and scramble back down.

No, this isn't happening; this *can't* be real. This is only a dream. I run to my grandmother, drifting, coarse barks reverberating deep in my pitted soul like an echo; the gravelly timbre falling like an indentation in the soil. His grating words follow me like a roll of thunder:

Did you think I wouldn't know? Did you really think I wouldn't know?

The curtains shift. The temple is torn.

Do you know now?

Yes.

Do you know why I brought you here?

Yes.

Are you ready to let go, Stanley?

Yes. But I want to be *Stacy*.

God will call you by the name you were first born with, the name your father gave you. The question remains, are you ready to meet Him?

I think so.

Come. Let's go.

All right.

She tells me to hold her hand tightly. I do. We ascend into the night like a dove.