

## The Animation of the Spirit

Daddy's grandpa lives just a two hour and one barf-bag car ride away from us in a small town called Bobber. I love my Great Gramps more than anything in the world. He hears my voice, which is more than I can say for my own parents and my big brothers and sister. I'm the youngest. Nothing I have to say is of much interest to them. Unless misbehaving, I'm pretty much invisible.

Grandpa used to be a lumberjack and his big warm flannel-shirted chest is still wide as a horse's behind. He lives alone in a big house that sits on the edge of the woods just up the trail from Lake Michigan. That place is old, really, *really* old—so old that there isn't much paint left on the outside. What's still hanging on is chipped and faded.

"Warn out," Grandpa says, "just like me. That old wood just won't hold the color anymore, granddaughter. And no matter how many times I take a hammer to those saggy hinges, that front door still refuses to close all the way—gotta' put a good hip into it to get her to shut, ain't so?"

Inside, the worn floors slant like the funhouse at State Fair. Right beneath the kitchen table looms a giant hole. Great-Great Aunt Kizzie told me that when she and her sisters were girls, they were tasked with making the sour kraut. After cutting up the cabbages, they used that hole to drop the cores right into the basement. *Awesome!*

The best part of Grandpa's house is his bathroom. The toilet tank hangs from the ceiling—from the ceiling! I always pretend to have to tinkle just so I can give that chain a yank.

Sometimes, during the summer, I stay behind with Gramps after my family heads back home. My brothers tease me about sleeping in that smelly old place—how I'm going to get cooties.

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They're crazy cakes and say that stuff just to rile me up. Grandpa's house is neat and clean. All of the doilies adorning the backs of the huge wine-colored velvet chairs and couches are bright white and starched to a crisp. The bedsheets smell of laundry soap and bleach. Although all of the patterns are worn off, his floors are clean and his furniture is dust-free and shiny.

His house is chockablock with curious and wonderful scents—wood smoke and the moist aroma of the fresh chill waters of Lake Michigan. When I climb into bed, I inhale the gentle tease of lavender. According to Grandpa, Great Great Grandma made her own lavender water and I suspect that he sprinkles a bit on my pillow before I come to visit—maybe his too. There is a mason jar filled with it in his bathroom cabinet and I'll just bet he has plenty more stashed away somewhere.

Grandpa and I never run out of things to do or talk about. Even though he's ninety years older than me, we still polka to his favorite afternoon oompapa station on the radio until it's time for Roller Derby. After supper, we walk along the shores and then through the woods. He talks. I listen. I talk. He listens.

At night we play cards. I drink orange soda pop. He sips his coffee royal and smokes a big cigar. Our conversations go something like this.

“Why do you call your morning coffee, coffee and your nighttime coffee, coffee royal?” I ask.

“Because my nighttime coffee is special, granddaughter? I add a little kick to it. It helps me to sleep, ain't so?”

“How about giving my orange pop a little kick, Grandpa?”

He tweaks the tip of my nose, laughs hard and adds another little bit of Wild Turkey to his brew.

Bedtime is my favorite. I bounce up onto the big soft mattress and laugh at the sound of the giant black springs yowling back at me. The weighty weight of the goose down comforter comforts me. Grandpa sits beside me on the edge of the bed and that's when the talk turns serious. That's when we discuss things that scare me more than anything. That's when he schools me on the gifts and talents I inherited from my Great Grandmother and her sisters—gypsy women who could foretell the future.

I'm no fortune-teller, but I do see and understand people's auras. Before my Great Great Aunt Kizzie died, she told me that I had "the touch." According to Kizzie and Grandpa, I'm a healer—not like broken arms or big gaping wounds or cancer or anything. I *wish* I could do that.

The first time I experienced my talent, I was just a kid roller skating down the block with my cousins. I fell down in front of Mrs. Paradise's house—the crabby lady who lived two doors away from us. My skate came off, the key was around my cousin Maddie's neck and they wouldn't be back for me until they circled the block.

*Fart blossoms!* As I leaned over my knees to untie the strap of my dangling skate, Mrs. Paradise blasted from her front door. "Get off of my lawn, you little snot. And stop skating past my house. You damn kids make so much noise, I can't think straight."

She grabbed my arm to haul me up and froze.

"Owie! You're diggin' into my arm, lady," I cried while still dangling from her grip.

That's when I felt it, her pain—her absolute all-consuming suffocating agony. She frowned down at me until the wrinkles on her brow smoothed and her pretty amber-colored eyes brightened. At the same time, it felt like the weight of the world had descended upon me. Mrs.

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Paradise knelt down next to me and placed her hands on my upper arms. Her loneliness consumed me. Her broken heart threatened mine. She smiled. I cried.

After Kizzie died, Gramps became my lone anchor. The last time we visited, I noticed a slight change in his colors. His normally bright yellow aura looked a little washed out, kinda' sun-bleached. I worried about that.



It's my eighth birthday. I wake with the sun, jump out of bed and step right on top of my stuffed bunny, my best friend, Bun-Bun. I'm glad it's him I booted out of bed and not my big sister. She's always bitchin' and moanin' to Mom about how they need to buy us twin beds because I kick the crap out of her all night long and talk in my sleep. She probably would've gone on and on all the way up to Grandpa's house.

I pour a bowl of cereal, creep out the back door, sit cross-legged in the grass where I bear witness to the sunrise. The fierce life force blasts through my body and recharges my soul. Sometimes, I hate being me. When I get back into the house, everybody is awake and preparing for our drive up to Bobber.

"Where've you been, ya' little weirdo?" My brother Luca asks.

"Luca!" Mom admonishes. "Stop!"

I ignore him. Before slipping back into my bedroom to get dressed, I look at Mom and note the fear in her eyes. I see it almost every time she looks at me. It's no picnic knowing that you frighten your own mother. The excitement of wearing my brand new red, white and blue sundress changes my mood and has me hopping, skipping and jumping all over the house until my sibs beg Mom and Dad to tie me to a chair.

We take our positions in the station wagon, my sister up front with my parents, four of my brothers in the back seat, me and Luca in the way-back. We're halfway to Grandpa's house

when my stomach begins to churn. Mom passes the brown paper bag back to me and I barf. The usual ughs, gags and yucks erupt from the rest of the family. *Don't they know that I can't help it?* At least I feel better—physically anyway.

Sixty miles, seventy miles—Daddy flies low along those old country roads while Mom clicks her sparkling crystal rosary beads, praying her Hail Mary's at record speed. The closer we get, the more my heart hurts. For the first time in my life, I *can* wait to get there.

We pull up to the old house. I clamber across the back of the seat, over my brothers' shoulders and out of the car door.

“What the hell, Amalia?” My oldest brother growls.

“Stay in the car,” I shout. “I want to go in alone and surprise him. Please? Let me go in first. It's important that I go in first. It's my birthday, can you just hear me this once? It's my birthday!”

I don't even realize that I'm crying. Mom pulls me close, wipes my tears away, pushes back the wild curls pulling away from my pony tail and makes me blow my nose. “What's going on, honey?”

“Well,” I say carefully, “I don't think Grandpa's home. Just like his house, he's lost his color.”

My sister rolls her eyes. Luca groans and says, “Why do you even talk to her, Mom? She's so weird!”

For the first time ever, I see something new in Mom's eyes. Instead of the normal fear and worry, there's a glimmer of... *What? Understanding? Belief?* She pats me on the behind and tells me to go—promises that everybody else will wait by the car.

I grab Bun-Bun, tuck him up under my arm, hop up the step and sail across the porch to stand before Grandpa's paint-chipped and color-faded back door. It's partially open. *He hadn't given it a hip. Why not? So his soul wouldn't be trapped inside is why not.*

A sudden wet wind whips up from the lake carrying with it the sweet scent of lavender. It swirls around, teases at the untamed tendrils tickling my neck and cheeks before changing direction. When it returns from out of the woods, with it comes the pungent aromas of pine and cigar, which mingle with the light violet. I want to smile—know that I should be happy for Great Grandpa and Grandma's reunion. But I worry instead. I've been set adrift—a lone freak—left to wonder if anybody will ever again hear my voice.