

THE GIFT

One result of her osteoporosis was that she could work without bending over. Only her arms and hands moved to reach her tools and ingredients. Pockets, full and heavy, anchored her skirt to the ground, hiding the bony legs upon which she sat. Her scalp shone through a thin cap of steel gray strings, but protection from the sun was unnecessary and useless, as the damage had been done years before. Her hatless humped torso resembled the stumpy shape of a garden gnome grayed with age.

Anna could tell it was Gran because she was looking for her. She could sometimes be surprised and oddly frightened by her grandmother's unexpected presence and she didn't want to be surprised today. Jordan was a new friend and she hadn't yet met Gran or Mother. First impressions were often lasting impressions at Anna's house.

"Jordan, please don't ask Gran if she is a *witch*, ok? For some reason, she thinks it is obvious and she much prefers *priestess*, anyway."

Jordan normally had a disgusted snort available for such an absurd statement, but her mind was slow as her eyes consumed the scene. The bungalow seemed typical in the front, but behind it the air lay heavier and the landscape more foreboding. A narrow path cut through knee-high growth towards a weathered shed, its door wide open and tapping soulfully against its wall.

Recovering her normal sassiness, she whispered, "Anna, she wouldn't do anything bad to you, but what about me? If I aggravate her, does she really have powers?"

"Just don't aggravate her, ok?"

An otherwise boring World Religions assignment had taken a cool turn after a conversation about Anna's Gran being *Wiccan*. Dr. Orr had balked at the inclusion of witchcraft as a religion until he found it in the U.S. Army chaplain's manual. Jordan gloated over her classmates as they planned interviews with their respective ministers, priests and rabbis. I mean, an old crone who thinks she is a *witch* (make that *priestess*)! The First Methodist Church of her parents had not yet instilled a personal spirituality in Jordan, nor had World Religions 101. When she realized the gnome a few feet ahead was alive, however, her first thought was, "Oh, God".

"Gran?" Had Anna spoken or was it a rustling of leaves that caused the gnome to slowly turn and meet Jordan's eyes with her own? There was no surprise in the watery pupils, just recognition. They said, "I've been expecting you."

Hesitantly, Jordan followed Anna's lead, settling down cross-legged on the path facing the bed where Gran seemed to grow from the earth. Jordan's low-slung jeans and skinny tank had felt great a few minutes ago. She normally loved to show off her narrow waist and sterling silver navel ring, but just now, she wanted nothing more than a thick protective sweatshirt.

As the crone turned back to her work, Jordan heard, "Go find your Mother". Anna sprang up and Jordan was alone with a witch.

She had planned to gather enough facts about Wicca to fill three pages, double-spaced, but she couldn't muster speech. An imagined conversation formed in her head.

"Why are you here?"

"To learn."

She watched the old woman's hands, protected by frayed fabric gloves, as they smoothed a circle of dirt between them. Her nimble fingers plucked at small weed sprouts until the earth lay cleanly exposed. Gran

handed Jordan a long sharp spade, “Dig a hole here” she said, pointing to the rough center of the earth’s bald spot, “just the depth of the spade”.

As she dug, Jordan thought seriously for the first time, “What *is* Wicca?”

The witch seemed distracted. Her left hand tossed a fistful of white powdery bonemeal around the growing hole while the right hand sprinkled colorful slow-release fertilizer in with it. With both hands on a garden fork, she stirred the mix.

“Wicca is life.”

Jordan felt impatient with this cursory answer. She would have to manage a real conversation if she were going to pass this course. She was about to risk a verbal probe when Gran drew a shriveled bulb from her skirt pocket, raising it with both hands above her face.

With more ceremony than Jordan thought necessary, the old woman inspected the leggy tuber, turning it around up close to her eyes until she seemed satisfied with it. Gently she placed the tuber, feet down, into the hole. With a smallish spade, she gradually filled the hole saying, “We appreciate this fertile soil and the winter rain that sustains it. We have faith in that unassuming bulb and the glorious blooms that it foreshadows. As the daily sun draws the plant up and the spring breeze calls its name, we cherish its potential.”

Suddenly she took Jordan’s hands in hers and pressed them into the earth over the bulb, covered by her own. She leaned in close, her mouth to Jordan’s ear. She did not speak she only breathed.

“You have the power.”

Jordan jerked her hands away, toppling backwards in the effort to escape those words. Her mind frantically denied its part in the silent conversation as her heart enveloped the truth.

“I’m not the witch, YOU are!”

The old eyes glistened. “My gift to you, dear, my gift to you.”