

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a white sleeveless dress, stands on a dark wooden staircase. She is looking to her right. The staircase is set against a dark, textured stone wall. Several thin, white laser beams with blue tips cross the scene diagonally. The overall mood is mysterious and suspenseful.

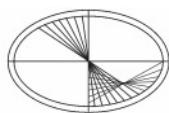
THEY'RE HERE YOU KNOW

STEVE PRICONE

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Dedication

For my beautiful mother, forever young.



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FAITH

IN OUR LAST conversation, while my mind was still functioning, before this horrible disease destroyed it, my granddaughter, my budding scientist, told me about dark matter. Annie said that it makes up seventy four percent of the universe. Almost three quarters of it is invisible and a mystery to scientists, but all that black emptiness out there is really a form of matter and energy. She said that no one can measure it or analyze it, and the only reason we know it's there is that its gravity seems to affect the motion of stars and galaxies. I asked her, "Is that enough evidence to make you believe in dark matter?"

Annie said, "Sometimes you have to have faith."

THEY'RE HERE YOU KNOW

I WAS TOTALLY IN the dark.

Night can be so absolutely black. There was a new moon, meaning there was *no* moon in the sky. I've always hated the name *new moon* — it was so deceiving. We haven't gotten our night vision yet. It was the last night of my Marie Curie Science and Technology Summer Camp, and we were doing the famous "One Hour Alone in Woods at Night" activity. Most kids do swimming and play volleyball at their summer camps. Here we raised mutant strains of bacteria and extracted DNA from strawberries. We shot off rockets and built bridges, but no volleyball.

Actually, I was not *alone*. There were twenty of us senior group fourteen-year olds, scattered around the forest, sitting alone about twenty feet away from each other. We were told to stay perfectly quiet for an hour and just soak in all the sights and night forest sounds. Eight others backed out of this final rite of passage here at Camp Curie. They're scared of the dark. Fraidy cats. The only danger here was the possibility of immense boredom. But for me, there was no such peril; my mind was full tonight, even if the moon wasn't. A letter had come from my mom today, informing me that she had something to discuss with me about my Nonna. I thought I knew what it was, and the thought of it made me happy.

Nonna had been getting forgetful and confused, and I bet she was coming to live with us so we could take care of her; that was such great news! She was very special to me, and I hadn't had as much contact with her since she moved to South Carolina.

"Jay, stop that humming," a counselor hissed at one of the campers.

"Sorry, Ms. Bastian."

"Quiet!" she implored.

It did get very quiet; sounds of a distant screech owl could be heard way off beyond the big pine trees that surrounded us, and a second one even further off answered it back. Not a mating call...it was a warning. *This is my hunting range. Get out.*

I made out the sound of terrified rodents, probably field mice and voles, signaling distress to each other; not only were the humans hanging out here, but there were two screech owls on the prowl. Not a good night

to be a rodent. A mental note was made of those sounds. The counselors were sure to quiz us tomorrow. With no moon, I could easily make out the constellations and beautiful, bright Saturn. It never ceased to amaze me how far away those stars are, how alone we are. Those stars are light years away. They seem like insignificant points of light. In reality, they are massive balls of fusing gases, with worlds of their own spinning around them. There are countless quadrillions of stars out there, yellows and blues and reds and oranges. It took my breath away just thinking about them.

Off to the north was old Cassiopeia sitting upside down on her throne. Over towards the east was her beautiful daughter Andromeda, with Perseus right there to protect her from the Cetus, the monster. My Nonna had told me the whole story of how the gods punished Cassiopeia by putting her upside down in the sky because she was so impressed with herself and her daughter's beauty. Andromeda was to be devoured by Cetus as punishment for her mother's vanity, until Perseus came, saved her from the beast, and as a reward married her. In my youth, we'd sit on Nonna's porch on summer and autumn nights, and she would point out the constellations and teach me the stories about each. There wasn't a Greek god or animal or planet that I couldn't identify. We even made up our own constellations and stories, playing "meet the dots" with the stars. There was Jenni the Lady Bug, Mairin the Dolphin, and Molly the Lacrosse Stick.

A shooting star! Such a quick flash of red. I knew the others had seen it too by the sound of hushed gasps. Nonna told me to always make a wish when I saw a "shooting star," because they were good luck. I don't wish on shooting stars and don't believe in luck. Science is to thank for my not believing in such things. Shooting stars are hunks of nickel or iron that have broken off an asteroid somewhere in our solar system. Its red flash told me that it was probably a small one made of iron that burned up streaking through our atmosphere about eighty miles up.

It was all about science. There was no such thing as luck or magic. By far the calmest camper out here in the darkness was me, because I could explain every sound and every shadow. There was nothing "unknown" to frighten me. Science explained it all! And that was my greatest joy, how perfect science was, and my greatest sorrow, how limiting science was. There was no *otherworldliness* in the universe, nothing to be scared of. No, wait... sometimes my dreams frightened me. I'd been dreaming a lot lately about flying. Usually I was flying through complete darkness. It was weird. There was no sense of my body. I was just a mind, a spirit flying through the unknown.

The forest silence out here was so soothing; it was like floating on a warm peaceful, tropical sea.

Then, on cue...Lyndon Antonelli farted. The sound cut through the silent night like thunder. Laughter and giggling broke out among the isolated campers...mainly the boys. Why do boys find flatulence so funny? The expulsion of nitrogen and carbon dioxide from air entering our stomachs and methane and hydrogen produced by *Methanobrevi smithii* bacteria breaking down food is just chemistry, not slapstick comedy. It never ceases to entertain boys or annoy me. With the male subspecies, the more they tried not to giggle, the more they did.

Ms. Bastian knew exactly who had done it, as did the rest of us. "Lyndon!" she cried out. That was Lyndon's sense of humor. Lyndon probably had planned this out all day, waiting for just the right moment, perhaps enjoying an extra helping of beans at dinner. Lyndon was actually quite brilliant—just very immature and crude.

"Well, I believe we're done out here. The mood has been broken." Ms. Bastian fired up her flashlight and shone it directly at the grinning Lyndon. "Everyone back to the cabins. Lyndon, I'll see you in my office."

Starting back with the others, I made sure to be the very last in line. After about two hundred yards on the trail I stopped. Once the others were out of sight, I took a small trail that cut into the woods to my left. I'd taken this trail many times before in the dark of night and knew that I wouldn't get in trouble. Hannah, my partner in crime and our cabin captain, had been clued in that I'd be late tonight, and I knew that she would cover for me. Even if I did get caught, I didn't mind. Camp was over in two days, and this would be my last year at camp, so what could they do to me?

My night vision kicked in, making maneuvering down the dark trail simple. A coyote howled off in the distance in the opposite direction of camp. It didn't frighten me though; coyotes are generally afraid of people. Tonight's goal was to find something to frighten me. A coyote howl would not make the grade.

After ten minutes of walking I whipped out my flashlight, snapping on the narrow beam of light toward the old shack. I called it "Slabsides" after the cabin that John Burroughs built in the Catskill Mountains in the 1800's. It looked really old, with worn and fragile stairs. I needed a flashlight to step gingerly around the cracks and holes.

"Hello, Slabsides," I whispered in a hush, my eyes caressing the soft darkness as if seeing an old friend. Slabsides had just one room. There

was a paneless window in the front and one in the back. It had been stripped of all furnishings save the remains of an old rusted bed frame against the back wall and a corroded lantern leaning in a corner. Maybe there never was anything to strip away from this place. Maybe that was it—just a bed and a lantern. I sat here sometimes trying to imagine who would have lived here, so far and so isolated from the world. Maybe it was a scientist, poet, or a philosopher who would come out here to be one with nature, to just think and write. Perhaps it was just an old hunter's cabin. Anyway, Slabsides was mine now. There was a big oak tree stump that served as a table, with two wooden tomato box crates for seats. Those were my additions, along with a carton of stick matches and several candles that I had hidden under one of the crates.

Originally, I came out here to see *them*, the ghosts that were rumored to inhabit these woods. I had read that in 1783 some Lenni Lenape Indians were killed on this spot by some settlers, and I came here to meet them because...that's what was most important to me...to see ghosts.

I didn't always sneak out here alone. Last year Jared Aberson took me out here, or should I say, I took him. Jared was what we called a Z-boson at camp. A Z-boson is a tiny nuclear particle that exists for about one octillionth of a second. When a camper signed up for just two weeks, he was a Z-boson. Z-bosons wouldn't be here long and they wouldn't be coming back, so we knew it was not worth trying to form a relationship with them. If we did get to like them...poof! They were gone. In a moment of weakness, I told him about Slabsides and the ghosts. Jared pretended he wanted to see them.

When I came out here with someone else, I didn't plan on seeing ghosts. It was the times I was alone here that were ghost business. If there was company, there was usually another agenda. Jared wasn't interested in ghosts—he wanted to make out. He was kind of cute, harmless, and a Z-boson, so there would be no time for drama afterwards. Jared was a good kisser, but not very knowledgeable when it came to astronomy. Whoever I fall in love with someday must be a good kisser and very good at astronomy. How could anyone with a soul not be infatuated with the cosmos?

In my first year, I came out with two girls who unfortunately were not Z-bosons. They had smuggled cigarettes into camp and wanted to puff away in some place "safe." Curious about what the big deal was about smoking, I took a couple of puffs. *Oh, gross!* I coughed like I had double pneumonia and almost threw up. No, actually I *did* throw up. A person smokes, stinks,

and then dies from all that smoking. What's the attraction? They weren't invited back. In fact, I've nailed up a "No Smoking" sign on the wall.

Tonight, I was here on business. Forget about the Lenni Lenape ghosts. So many attempts had been made to contact them. If they were here, we'd have been close friends by now. I was here tonight to say goodbye to my little cabin. I leaned on the crate, pulled out a last quarter remnant of a candle, and lit it. A warm glow filled the cabin. My long black shadow danced on the wall and floor as the flame quivered in the night's breeze. I sat down on the other box, my hands on the oak trunk, and sighed.

"Last chance, ghosts! This is my last night here."

It felt silly calling out to the dark, that *nothingness* that lay around me. But the feeling was worse than silly; there was loneliness. Nothing supernatural was out there, and I had become resigned to that. It was all protons and neutrons and packets of quantum energy. It both fascinated me and saddened me.

A universe filled with huge gaps of mystery with thousands of unexplainable dimensions was my hope, my dream. Why couldn't the life force that is our soul never end? Unexplained possibilities should be the norm. So, science be damned. There must be proof out there that the supernatural exists. But hoping doesn't make it exist. As a good scientist, I needed observation and data. I had visited so many "haunted" houses and found nothing—not a vapor or a knock. My mind was open, but I feared the "other side" did not exist. Just science existed. It was all just protons and neutrons.

In kindergarten, I was the only one who didn't believe in Santa Claus. Santa just didn't seem logical to me. An older person like himself and Mrs. Claus working in arctic conditions all those years had to take a toll. There were flying squirrels and flying fish, but the mass to aerodynamic ratio of a reindeer just did not allow for them to achieve flight. And a twenty-four hour period to visit each home of every child on the planet to deliver presents just didn't jive with Einstein's Space-Time Continuum. I tried to win the rest of the class over to my side by explaining these ideas, but that didn't make me very popular, and I got shouted down. Actually, I got cried and screamed down. One girl threw up on me she was crying so hard. Another girl hit me with a soft, overripe banana. Nothing wins an argument like screaming and crying and soft mushy bananas.

I was suspended for a day for inciting a riot. When I returned, the kindergarten teacher pulled me aside and called me a very bright girl, but she said I shouldn't make the other kids cry. Santa was real, and all those

theories I had put to the class could be overturned by one single detail... MAGIC. After I laughed at her, they suspended me for another day. My Nonna believed in miracles...and she tried to make me believe in them too.

Ms. Farley, my chemistry teacher, told me that I took things much too seriously and that I should lighten up. She told me once that inside of me lived an "Old Soul," whatever that meant.

"It's all protons and neutrons, Ms. Farley," I would tell her. "After the Big Bang, it's all one grand party of nuclear and chemical reactions." She told me that there was so much more going on in the universe that we didn't have a clue about.

"Atoms and molecules. There are no miracles," I'd repeat.

Patting me on the head, she would say to me, "Annie, it's *all* a miracle." She added that someday I'd get *younger* and realize that. That confused me. How would I get *younger*?

Ghosts were my holy grail. What would the existence of ghosts do to all the hard science we believed in? It would open doors to new dimensions, but proof was lacking. There was no data.

"Ghosts, please!" I shouted.

Maybe since they were Native Americans they didn't understand English. Perhaps they were afraid of *me*. But it always came down to... *maybe ghosts didn't exist*.

Then I heard it. It was a deep guttural sound coming from the darkness outside. I left the candle on the stump and stepped softly and slowly to the window pane. My heart raced. My eyes swept over the dark thickness around the cabin.

"Heal!" I called out. That's "hi" in Lenni Lenape. Candle light hampered my night vision. It was hard to distinguish the shape among the trees. Then I saw it clearly enough. A dark form emerged from behind the trees and seemed to float. It was big and moved purposefully towards me, without fear or hesitation.

"Heeeaaa!" I repeated, shakily leaning back from the window a bit. A grunt or a growl was returned to me from the dark form that was now just twenty feet in front of me.

HEY YOURSELF. Who the hell's in there? You one of those spoiled genius kids from that camp?"

It was another dead end. A flashlight exploded into my face, stinging my eyes and blinding me for a moment. Turning away, I protested. "Stop that!" I should have been afraid. This was a real person. People scare me, not ghosts. Who knows what he was up to wandering in the woods this time of night.

"I told those damn camp directors to keep you brats out of these woods. You have your own property over yonder. You don't need to be burning up my woods with your candles, your cigarettes, and who knows what else you're smoking up here."

"No one's smoking, and no one's going to burn down your woods," I replied.

A thin old man stuck his head into the window and looked around, darting a bouncing beam of light around the cabin. "Well, your party's over, girlie. Where are the others? Run off?"

"There are no others. Just me," I snapped.

He wore loose-fitting overalls held up with suspenders and a red hunter's cap pulled almost comically over most of his head. He looked about a hundred years old. He came up around the side and walked through the door.

"What are you doing here all alone in the middle of these woods? Are you crazy, girl?" he barked, still shining the light around the room looking for party goers.

I nodded, feeling a little more comfortable as his tone almost had a hint of concern in it...almost.

"Yeah, there are a lot of people who would say that I'm crazy." I had no problem explaining myself to adults. It seemed like I always had to explain myself to teachers or administrators or parents of friends. They always found my thinking weird and in need of footnotes.

"This is no place for a little girl like you this time of night. You got to be up to no good. You must be looking for trouble here," he said, as he returned his beam of light to my face.

"Actually sir, I'm looking for ghosts," I responded with a professorial demeanor.

"Ghosts?" he asked bemused. "You're smoking something, aren't you? Some of that crazy weed."

I pointed to my "No Smoking" sign. "No sir. I've been here on a scientific expedition looking to meet ghosts, ghosts of the Lenni Lenape who were killed long ago."

The man looked at me oddly and turned his head as if he were looking at an alien that had just landed in front of him. "What's...your...name?" he asked as he drew the sentence out much too slowly.

"Annie. What's yours?" I chirped, shining my light into his face.

He squinted at the light and tried to wave it off like an annoying bug flitting in front of him. I moved the beam a little to his right. "Ben. Ben Greeb. How do you know about those Indians? Nobody knows about that story, except for a few of us who are so old we're close to being ghosts ourselves."

"I told you, I'm on a scientific expedition. I'm a scientist. We scientists know stuff." Pausing, I waited for his response. When it did not come, I inquired, "Have you seen them, the ghosts?"

"Shoot, anybody who spends time in these woods has seen those Indians," he said, moving his light off my face.

"I haven't," I said forlornly, gazing out into the darkness.

"Maybe you scare them, Annie." He cackled and spit a brown gob of tobacco juice on my cabin's floor.

I laughed. That had been my contention for years. Mr. Greeb seeing ghosts didn't count. Anyone who told me they've seen a ghost didn't count. That was tainted data. It was *my* quest. For it to be real I had to see them...at least twice.

"What did they look like?" I asked earnestly.

"They looked like Indians...none too happy Indians."

"What makes them 'none too happy'?" I returned, mimicking his voice.

Greeb looked at me long and hard. "Here's the thing. I could make up a story about what happened to them, but the black truth is it's not a story a young lady should hear...ain't a story nobody should hear."

I clasped my hands together as if in prayer. "Please. I've heard a lot of gruesome stories in my day."

"Your day?" he muttered to himself with a slight smile. "Can't be a bit more than twelve years old. You ain't old enough to have a *day*. Tell you what, I'll give you the story if you promise to leave this old claptrap and never come back, cause next time I call the police...or worse, my wife."

This was to be my last night here anyway. I smiled to myself. "Ah shucks...okay," I said as I pretended to pout.

Sitting his long fragile body down, he grimaced as if his rickety bones would snap with each movement down. He let out a sigh of relief once he sat and looked at me again. "Can't understand what a little girl like you is doing in these dark woods late at night not scared out of your mind. You remind me of my great-granddaughter."

"Indians?" I reminded him impatiently. "You were going to tell me about Indians."

Looking at me, he cleared his throat and stroked his chin. His eyes closed as if he was trying to visualize the story in his mind. "It was 1750 or thereabouts. A small tribe of those Indians lived here in their long houses. Right about...here, where we're sitting. They farmed the land, corn and beans, with enough deer, squirrels, and rabbits to keep them in meat. They had this spiritual leader like a...a...medicine man."

"A shaman," I interceded.

"Whatever! He was a man connected to the Great Spirit. His name was Lynawana...or something like that. There was a legend that he created, telling the tribe that if only they would drink water from this one creek that flowed out of that mountain yonder," he pointed to a hill that we campers had climbed many times, "they would become invincible and could never die, a gift from the Great Spirit. So, Lynawana instructed his Indians to ignore the threat from the whites and stand their ground. Well, after they had refused the junk glass beads and threats to move, the whites came in one night and slaughtered them, each and every one. This spot right here," he said, as he thumped his finger hard upon the stump three times. "Here was where it happened."

He cleared his throat with a couple of coughs. "They say the body of Lynawana was never found among the dead. White folks said he probably ran off; the Indians...now they said different. They said that he, and only he, got the power, and that he lives forever roaming around these woods. Now there are some strange stories over the years about people getting lost and never being found again. They say Lynawana is always looking to get his revenge on the white man..." Ben cleared his throat again. "Or white woman."

He tapped the stump twice more. "And that's the story. Now you stay away from here. Go back to your camp, and tell all your little friends to stay the hell out of these woods."

I looked at him with skepticism. "Is that really the story?"

"No, it ain't. I made that one up. I told you. I don't want to tell you the real story. And trust me, you don't want to hear it. Now I really think you should leave. RIGHT NOW!" he snapped.

I jumped back a bit from his surprisingly thunderous voice. "Okay, Mr. Greeb, I will be leaving, and since camp is over this week and I won't be coming back next year, I will not be back here."

"Well," he responded, shaking his head, "that's a good thing."

I offered him a handshake goodbye, which he ignored. "Thank you for your story, even though it was made up."

"Yeah, well you're welcome. And, well, some of it was true, like those Indians thinking that Lynawana still exists in these woods. Good luck with you seeing a ghost, if that's what you really want. Damnedest thing I ever heard of—a kid *wanting* to see a ghost." With the slow, careful creaking of old knees, he stood up from the crate and looked down at me with a confused and concerned expression.

He took his hand and gently rubbed the top of my head, brushing my hair around—an annoying and patronizing gesture that I hated with a passion. "You're a good kid," he said in a grandfatherly way.

And with that he walked out the cabin door and faded back into the darkness from which he had come. I stuck around a while, hoping to be visited by Lynawana. But after fifteen minutes I stood up, looked around, blew out my candle, and wished my cabin goodbye.

§ § §

Tap! Tap! Tap! After a long moment, I finally got my response.

"Who is it?" Hannah whispered from the other side of the door.

"Enrico Fermi," I responded. That was our secret code.

Hannah slowly creaked open our camp cabin door. "Enter," she whispered. She knew of my nocturnal visits in the woods, and I knew that she sometimes snuck out to meet Luke Harper for walks by the lake, so we had a deal to keep each other's transgressions secret as gatekeepers of the cabin.

"Late night," she commented like a wary parent as she turned to get back into her upper bunk.

Hannah was my best buddy at camp, a year older and a year wiser. Because of that seniority she was my mentor when it came to math, physics, and boys. I was so envious of her auburn red hair, that I would trade a Nobel Prize for, and piercing green eyes. She had a very commanding look.

"Yeah," I responded like a guilty daughter as I followed her to my lower bunk and quickly changed into my sweats. In what seemed like seconds I plopped down onto my mattress.

"I hope he was cute," she sighed with sarcasm...or hope, knowing why I spent time out there. I heard her rip open a bag of Oreos, snap one in half with her teeth, and chew each half like a hungry chipmunk. She waved one at me from her perch, enticing me to join her feast.

"No," I begged off politely, "and, no, he was too old for me. Actually, he was too old for my grandmother."

"What!" she gasped, choking on her Oreo. She glared at me with disbelief. "What?" she repeated.

"Yeah. This guy must have been close to eighty." I sighed, knowing that I was making her brain explode.

Hannah slid down and almost fell from her top bunk. "*What* are you talking about? Eighty?"

I giggled and looked at her with a reassuring smile. I reached into the bag and pulled out a cookie. "Here," I offered, waving the Oreo teasingly across her face.

Her hand just slapped it aside. "Annie...eighty?"

"Easy, girl." I popped the cookie into my mouth and chewed up half and swallowed before I continued. "This old farmer, Mr. Greeb, stopped by for a visit and yelled at me for trespassing."

"Oh," she sighed with a big exhale of relief as she smacked my foot. "You should have said that right at the beginning."

"He ended up telling me a story. I think he ended up liking me," I said with a hint of melancholy.

"That's nice. In the movies, he would have chopped your head off and fed your eyes to the chipmunks," she snapped while pointing that wary parental finger at me.

There was a sudden knock on the wall from the girls who bunked next to Hannah. "You girls planning on getting to sleep and shutting up any time soon?" a tired and cranky Julia barked through the wall.

We looked at each other and grinned. I knew Hannah would not sit still for that sort of rudeness. "If you'd stop snoring, you cow!" Hannah shot back. "That's why we're up, you know...all that snoring coming from your side!"

My eyes widened and I covered my mouth to hold back a laugh. Julia never snored, and I knew Hannah was just messing with her head.

"I don't snore!" Julia exploded.

Suddenly we heard a knocking on Julia's wall. "Hey! Quiet down in there!" a faint but angry voice directed at Julia.

"But..." Julia stammered.

Hannah raced over to the wall and placed her mouth up to the knotty pine boards. "That's right, Julia. You get to bed right now and stop bothering everyone with your shouting and snoring."

There was a long, harsh silence. I could just see the smoke coming out of Julia's angry red ears. Finally, a restrained bark was returned. "I'll get you for this, Hannah."

There was another knock on Julia's wall.

"Okay. I'm going back to bed," she shouted, addressing the knock.

As Hannah returned triumphantly to the bunk, she fluttered her fingers demanding another cookie as a reward for her mischief. I grabbed the bag and gave her two.

"Didn't your Mr. Greeb scare you?"

"No, Mr. Greeb was nice; he was worried about me." I glanced at the wall again imagining Julia steaming in her bunk.

"I worry about you, too. You know, you're a nut with your ghost quest," she mumbled with her mouth full of Oreo, turning her back on me as she climbed to the upper bunk.

I didn't reply.

"You see any ghosts tonight?" she inquired with genuine interest.

She knew I hadn't. If I had seen a ghost, I'd have come home as if I had just won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry, whooping and hollering and carrying on like a giddy school girl. "No, no ghosts. Just Mr. Greeb's ghost story about the Lenapes."

"I guess you're tired of just stories, huh?" she asked.

"You know it," I said with a heavy sigh. A long silence ensued. I thought she had gone to sleep. Then I heard the creaking of the bunk steps as she stepped down onto the floor.

"Move over, girl," she ordered, sitting on the edge of my bunk. I moved over. Our beds weren't too big to begin with. She squeezed in beside me.

"Have you put a time limit on this folly for hunting ghosts...dead people, Dr. Annie? When will you realize that all you are doing is just a waste of time and that this is a finite universe? Science rules. When will you come back to the dark side?" she added with a creepy voice. I liked it when she called me "Dr. Annie."

"*I am* exploring the dark side. You, Ms. Hannah, are on the light side."

Smiling, she just looked at me for a long moment. "What's the strangest thing you've done on your quest?" she asked earnestly, flipping an Oreo against the wall adjacent to Julia's bunk.

I thought a moment. "I've done some very strange things. I guess the strangest was hiring myself out as a shomer."

"Excuse me? A what?"

"A shomer. In the Hebrew religion, the body of the deceased must be buried within twenty-four hours. During that time, while the family makes preparations for the burial, the body must have someone there watching over it, a guardian."

"I didn't know you were Jewish," she said, giving me a perplexed look since my last name was Barone.

"I'm not. I thought it might be an opportunity to see a spirit rise up or talk or roll its eyes or something. So, I hired myself out as a shomer, or a watcher."

"But you're not Jewish," she repeated, poking me in the forehead, a gesture that she knew annoyed me to no end. I pushed her hand away.

"Yeah, that and being a girl didn't put me high up on the list. But, finally there was a family that was desperate. Their grandfather, a guy named Saul, had died. They explained to me that some of the family had to help out at the deli he owned, while some had to make funeral arrangements. I guess shomer pickings were slow that week and...bingo, I became the first Italian, agnostic, female shomer. I was hired to watch a dead guy."

"Creepy," she uttered.

"Saul looked like a nice guy. He had a very peaceful face. I had to read King David's psalms to him for six hours till the family returned."

"Six hours?"

"Yeah. Couldn't leave old Saul alone. I would pause between psalms and chat with him."

She pulled away from me in mock disgust. "Eww."

"I'd ask him some questions and try to get him to respond, like 'Can you hear me, Saul? Where are you now, Saul? Is there anything that you'd like me to tell your family, Saul?' I tried to raise the dead, but he just laid there...Dead Saul."

Hannah nodded her head. "Yes, I get that. Kind of like trying to strike up a conversation with Steve Mitchell at the last dance...Dead Steve."

At the memory of that frustrating day, I shook my head. "I just wanted a whisper from Saul...a wink, a smirk, a twitch, something! I got nothing."

"That's creepy, Annie. You are one desperate ghost hunter. Listen, from one scientist to another, dead is dead. Brain function stops, and you can read the Bible, the Koran, Harry Potter, The Hunger Games, Archie comics...you're not going to get a wink or a smirk from me."

I had no answer for that. That was the problem. She was probably right. Dead is dead. I continued in a flat monotone as if being interrogated.

"One night I went out by myself to an old cemetery in our town with a beanbag seat, a flashlight, and Twizzlers. I sat there in the still darkness and tried to contact spirits. I shined the light on various headstones and called them out by name. I'd pick topics that fit into their time line to discuss. If they had died in the thirties, I talked about the Depression. If they had died in the fifties, I would ask them about Elvis and rock and roll."

"Wow! You're real serious about this stuff, huh? Why the Twizzlers?"

"Because I like the way they taste."

"Oh." She nodded at my logic.

Here's one of the many reasons why I loved this girl so much. She was totally invested in science. Two years ago, she finished fourth in the National Westinghouse Science Fair Competition. She was the youngest person ever to place in the top ten. She showed how a vaccine that cured polio might also be manipulated to cure malaria. Her belief in science was absolute, so for her to entertain my ideas about ghosts and spirits took so much empathy and patience on her part. Inside, I knew she was laughing at me, but outside, she tolerated me. She would listen, smile, and just giggle a bit.

"I'm serious about this because everything hinges on it," I sighed as I shot her a deep urgent look.

"Maybe...just maybe, you shouldn't *want* to believe in it, Annie. Things that you feel you *need* to believe in could break your heart when you find out they aren't worth believing in. Maybe you should believe in the believable. Believe in what is real," she whispered as she rubbed my arm like a consoling sister.

"It can't be so fixed and cold. Hey, light, heat, sound, and gravitational waves never get destroyed; they just go on changing from one form to another. Why not our energy, our essence? There's got to be more of a purpose, a deeper system beyond the physical. It can't be all there is. Where do our souls go?" My eyes grew heavy with those words. I had rerun those thoughts in my head so many times and spoken them out loud so many times. Tonight, I was weary with thinking and hoping.

"Can't...but it could...and is." She gave me a hug to ease the pain of reality. Our hug and a silence lasted a long moment. "Well, Doctor Annie, I thought you were with some cute guy out there and had some juicy details to share with me, so you won't be too insulted if I go back up to my bunk now and get some sleep."

"Oh, please do. I'm exhausted," I said, tapping her forehead gently.

There was another hug from her, and she climbed back to her perch. Once there, she craned her head down at me. "You know, Doc, when I was four years old I once put bluebell petals all around a cherry tree in my backyard. That was to attract fairies. Hoping beyond hope to see fairies, I ached. I would have given anything to see a fairy. Well, I stayed up most of the night looking out my window waiting to see them."

"What did you see?"

She paused for dramatic affect and then announced, "A skunk. It ate the petals and sprayed my dog."

I pulled the blanket up tightly to my chin and prepared to sleep, perchance to dream.

Dreams.

THEY'RE HERE YOU KNOW

THERE I WAS, sitting on a tree branch in a park. It was really foggy out. There was a group of boys playing chess. They wouldn't look at me. Nobody in the park would look at me. Had I done something wrong? The feeling of isolation flowed over me like an icy shower. I finally went over to someone and turned them around so they would face me. A shock ran through me. There was no face! I could recognize all the people there by their hair and their clothes; the only thing different about them was that they had no faces. I continued to turn people around. Not one of them had a face. I ran to one of the park benches. A feeling of guilt swept over me; I couldn't understand why. I felt upset and lonely. There was no one to talk to. I cupped my head in my hands and began to cry. Then, I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. There was a faceless woman standing next to me. Gradually her features began to reappear. It was my Nonna.

She softly brushed her hand across my cheek and said gently, "You're a good girl. I will ease your pain. Just follow me. I know what you seek."

I followed her as she started to walk away. After only a few steps she turned around, and stared at me with a helpless, pleading look. Her face contorted into a grotesque silent scream, her eyes went empty, and she slowly melted down like a wax candle upon the sidewalk.

"NONNA!" I screamed and jolted up in my bunk, nearly hitting my head on the upper board.

"What! What!" Hannah shouted, having suddenly been awakened by my scream.

I gulped down a couple of deep breaths. "Sorry. I had a nightmare."

"Listen, Doc. I love you, but you're starting to weird me out," she said, trying to recapture her breath from the shock of being awakened by a scream in the night.

"I'm sorry," was all I could offer.

"Scary dream?" she asked sympathetically.

"Kind of."

She yawned and wiped the sleep from her eyes, then leaned over her bunk, looked down at me, and smiled empathetically. "Well, it's almost morning now. It was just a dream. It can't hurt you now."

Just a dream. I had always thought dreams were proof of the supernatural, my proof of immortality. I always thought of these little movies going on in my head as little miracles, voices and pictures from the beyond, clues to the unexplainable—sometimes funny, sometimes horrifying, but always mysterious. Let me see science explain that one away. Well, they did. I read up on dreams, finding out that dreams are the brain's way of making sense of our experiences during the week and moving them through the visual and audio neurons to their target area, the memory neurons for storage, from short term to long term memory. As weird as my dream might be, it was just neuron activity trying to make sense of my crazy ideas. You did it again, science. You explained it away. Science was awesome! Science sucked!

This was to be our last full day at camp. After breakfast, Hannah, two boys, Adam Jones and Kevin Envers, and I were selected to clean out the chemistry lab, wrap up all the glassware and chemicals, and pack them away in boxes. Lucky us. When we were done, they expected us to go over to the biology lab and help clean that up too. Fat chance.

Our chemistry lab was hot and musty from all the chemical residue of the summer reactions. My favorite was vaporizing a gummy bear. After melting down the white crystals of potassium chlorate over a Bunsen burner, I popped the gummy bear into the test tube. Immediately that gummy bear was buffeted around in a fury of purple and pink florescence that lasted a good twenty seconds. In the end, he was gone, but that of course could be explained. Mr. Gummy was changed into carbon, carbon dioxide, and water vapor. Gone, but not forgotten by science. After about an hour, the stuffy lab got the better of us. To escape the heat and the smell of chemicals that were stuck in our noses, the four of us headed out to the far end of the lake for one last swim. Let the frogs and fetal pigs clean up the biology lab.

Both boys stripped down naked on the huge boulder we called Baldy Rock and jumped in, taunting us to join them in a skinny dip. "What, are you girls chicken? Afraid to show what you got?"

I looked at Hannah wide eyed and shook my head. My confident mentor smiled back at me, winked, and then climbed up onto Baldy Rock, cupped her hands around her mouth, and called back at them. "Okay boys! Here we come!"

Hannah grabbed Adam's clothes and dove in fully clothed, much to my relief. I followed her, taking Kevin's jeans and camp shirt. Hannah

yelled back while doing the backstroke, "What we got are your clothes! That's what we got!"

We were both pretty good swimmers and kept going all the way across the lake, as the boys screamed and cursed at us. They weren't quick enough to catch us, nor strong enough to follow us. When we got to the other shore, we waved at the boys and threw their clothes up into a tree. They'd have to take a bit of a hike naked through the woods to retrieve them.

"I hate being called chicken," Hannah growled as we started back to the camp for lunch...our last lunch there together.

You think you'll always stay in touch with the people you love, that somehow, they will stay a part of your life. As I watched Hannah nibble at her pizza, I felt like I'd never see her again, even though we vowed to stay close.

§ § §

"I think that's my dad over there," she called out to me as she jumped up and down pointing at a black Mercedes Benz.

We were all assembled in the parking area on that last afternoon, waiting to be picked up and brought home. It was one of those bittersweet moments for most of the campers. For me it was just sweet, except for leaving Hannah.

"You coming back next summer?" she asked as she returned a wave and a blown kiss from her dad.

I just shrugged.

"Well," she sighed, trying to remain cool. "You got me on Facebook. Stay in touch. You certainly are an interesting girlfriend, girlfriend!"

"You're pretty cool yourself," I said, putting my hand on her shoulder.

"Oh, I didn't say you were cool. I said 'interesting.'" She laughed and gave me a genuine hug. "Good luck with your ghosts. I hope you find what you're looking for. Me, I'm looking for a boy with a brain that's bigger than his grabby hands."

"A boy with a brain or a ghost?" I asked with a smirk.

"Coming, Dad!" she shouted and started to wheel her suitcase towards her dad's car. Halfway there she turned back to me and shouted, "Have a good school year! Break some hearts!"

"You too!" I shouted back, blowing her a kiss. I waved goodbye to her as her Dad's car pulled away in a cloud of parking area dust. I liked her.

§ § §

It wasn't too much later when my mother drove up in her Chevy. Mom opened her door, ran over to me, and gave me a hug, a very uncharacteristically hard hug. I thought she'd break a rib. Finally, she let go and pulled back a bit. She looked into my face and kissed me hard on the cheek—uncharacteristically hard.

"I missed you so much, sweetie!"

"I missed you too, Mom," I said with sincerity, returning her hug ever so gently, ever so carefully.

"Kevin!" she yelled, turning towards the car. "Help Annie put her bags into the trunk."

"Ah, Mom, do I have too?" he whined, not raising his eyes from the game on his iPad.

"Yes! You haven't seen your sister in four weeks. Act like you missed her," she demanded.

Putting down his game, he walked over to us. "Okay. I'll *act*." His head cocked to the right a bit, he fluttered his eye lashes, looked at me in mock emotion, and sighed a deep fake sigh. "Oh, Annie Lyn, I missed you soooo much. It's so good to have you home again." Then, he stuck his tongue out at me. "I'll put your stupid bags in the trunk."

I jumped into the front seat next to mom. After Kevin got in and we pulled away from the camp, I turned around, reached out, and pulled Kevin towards me. "I know you hate to get mushy, but I did miss *you*, you little monkey." I kissed him on the cheek.

My kiss was wiped off as if I had smeared the Ebola virus on his cheek. He fell back onto the seat, arms crossed in annoyance at a sister's kiss, and returned to the solitude of his favorite game, killing hundreds, if not thousands, of mutant space zombies.

"I know it was only four weeks but I *did* miss you," I insisted as I tried to make this a memorable moment, a turning point in our sister/brother relationship.

"Phooey!" was all he said in return.

"Hope you missed me too, honey," Mom asked.

"You know I did, Mom," I returned, placing my hand warmly on her shoulder, "and I missed Potter too."

Kevin had been in charge of caring for Potter, my hamster, while I

was away. He was in charge of changing the litter once a week, feeding him, and giving him water. How hard could that have been?

"Potter's dead," Kevin announced casually, as if he were telling me the temperature outside.

"What?" I shrieked, turning to see if he was joking. I turned to Mom anxiously. "Kevin's kidding, right?"

"No, sweetie, Potter's gone. I didn't want to email you the news at camp. I thought that it would ruin your fun," she said.

This time when I turned around to face Kevin again, I was much less mushy. He was no longer 'my little monkey.' I eyed him like he was a mutant space zombie. "Did *you* kill him?" I screamed.

"Annie!" Mom scolded.

"No!" Kevin screamed back angrily, curling himself into a ball.

"Annie! How could you think Kevin could hurt Potter? I know for a fact he did a very good job caring for him. Potter was just old and had lived a long, comfortable life for a hamster. You knew that he was on the edge of death all year. The poor creature just died on Kevin's watch."

"Yeah!" Kevin shot back, sticking an angry tongue out at me.

Mom was right. Potter was five, quite up there in years. That's about ninety in human years. *It was a good hamster life. He was just protons and neutrons anyway*, I thought.

"Sorry," I semi-apologized to Kevin, arms crossed without turning to look at him.

"I flushed Potter down the toilet," he casually added.

"You what?" I cried out, spinning back around like a top. "Mom!"

"Yes, honey, your brother flushed Potter. It happened before I had a chance to stop him."

"You idiot! You flush goldfish down the toilet, not hamsters! Hamsters get buried in the backyard in a little box with a small bunch of flowers. It's supposed to be a sweet and tearful ceremony, not flushed down a toilet. How'd *you* like to be flushed down a toilet?"

"Annie!" Mom scolded again.

"Well, it would save on funeral expenses."

"Annie, stop that right now!" she demanded.

"You're right, Mom, what we save on the funeral, we'd lose on the plumber's bill."

The next fifteen minutes of our trip home were total silence, except for Kevin humming *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*. I didn't give him the satisfaction

of telling him that he was annoying me, and he knew that without me telling him—that's why he was doing it. I finally broke the silence.

"I missed Nonna, too," I blurted out in anticipation of her news about her coming to stay with us.

Kevin stopped humming, looked up, and glanced up nervously at Mom.

"You know, I'm going to start to help out grandma more. I've neglected her and I feel so guilty, so stupid. Poor Nonna was getting so forgetful the last time I saw her. Wow, that was almost four months ago, and she never called me or wrote to me at camp. I started thinking that maybe she was mad at me. I want to spend more time with her. That lady's not getting any younger you know."

My mom did not respond, just looking out at the road ahead. Then she whispered ominously, "Annie, Potter wasn't the only news that I withheld from you. It's about your grandmother."

I knew by her manner and voice the news was not going to be good. "No! She didn't..." I choked, thinking the worst.

Mom answered in slow, measured words. "No, honey, she didn't die." Tears welled up in her eyes. "Grandma's...grandma's in a *home*. We had to place her in a *home*."

"A home? You mean like a *nursing* home? Nonna hates nursing homes. Remember how she couldn't visit Aunt Millie when she was in one. Is she hurt or sick? She would never allow you to put her there." I was angry and confused. How could she put my Nonna in a home, like a prisoner?

"Honey, all that forgetting, remember? It got worse. It got really bad, very quickly. The stove was being left on, and we were told she was walking into neighbor's houses without a reason. Local police called me twice when they found her in her car, lost and confused. Finally, she drove into the city and had no idea where she was. Grandma got out of the car and was just wandering. Luckily some nice people stopped her and questioned her. When they saw how disoriented she was, they called the police. I was called to the station to pick her up. She knew what was happening and was scared and upset. It scared her so much."

"What was happening?" I demanded, thrusting my face close to hers.

"Grandma was forgetting my name, Annie...me...her daughter-in-law..." Mom could not fight back the tears any longer and sobbed.

"Mom?" I asked with growing concern and urgency.

My mother paused. "I'll be okay, sweetie," she reassured me, sniffing back some tears. "Your grandma got so mad at me when I took her car

keys from her. I never saw her so angry. She screamed at me and told me that she hated me. ‘Let me die!’ was what she screamed at me...that I might as well kill her rather than take her car keys. But it was getting too dangerous to leave her alone, and especially to let her drive.”

“Why can’t she live here with us? We can take care of her,” I pleaded, grabbing tightly onto her shoulder, tears now puddling in my eyes.

“Annie, she needs a lot more help than we can give her—the care of people who can deal with...people like her.”

“What do you mean *people like her*?” I returned angrily. “That’s my Nonna.”

My mother gulped back more tears. “Not anymore, honey. Not anymore.”

§ § §

That night, I Googled *Alzheimer’s disease*.

A prehensile form of dementia whose symptoms begin with impaired memory leading to impaired thought and speech, followed by total helplessness.

My father died four years ago. He was killed in a car accident. According to science, my dad doesn’t exist anymore. Chemical reactions in his brain and body had stopped. Neurons stopped sparking, the exchange of energy and electrons ceased.

This loving, vital man who tried to teach me to hit a softball and joked with me about being a science geek. He told me bedtime stories that he made up on the spot. This man who laughed often and easily, who kissed and hugged me like I was the most precious thing he had ever seen, was gone forever, like a burnt match...ash...elemental carbon...nothing. It didn’t make sense, all his amazing energy gone. I didn’t want him to be nothing. I didn’t want Mom or Kevin, and especially Nonna, who was getting so old, so forgetful, to someday be nothing...and me, I didn’t want to be nothing. It terrified me sometimes to think I would not exist someday. Then why shave my legs?

Helplessness?

That was the last word that should be used to describe my Nonna. But helplessness was what I felt right now. Sleep would not come to me. My mind swam into dark, ugly depths thinking of my poor grandma in a nursing home. How could this happen to her? It was all so dark, so unfair.

My grandparents had come to America from Italy. They had lived in a little village in central Italy called Sala Consilina. I didn't remember my grandpa; he died before I had any real interaction with people. Nonna said he was a good man, a farmer in the "old country." Grandma showed me pictures of him and of the little village she missed dearly. When I graduate from high school, she promised to take me to Rome, Florence, and Sala Consilina as a graduation gift, just the two of us. Italy sounded lovely. She told me Sala Consilina was surrounded by green rolling hills and quaint little stone buildings.

When she retired, she had gardens, vegetable gardens with tomatoes, beans, peppers, zucchini, basil, and oregano. That garden was a tribute to her husband, Salvatore, the farmer. Her real love was her flower garden. In the spring, flowers like tulips, daffodils, pansies, and crepe myrtles were planted. Behind them was a crescent of summer flowers—black-eyed Susans, dragon flowers, zinnias, impatiens, daisies, and so many more. At the sides of the crescent she had her autumn flowers.

"Each moment has its joy," she told me. "Each season has its colors to rejoice in. There should be flowers until the end, when the winter comes. Flowers should greet the last breath of autumn, the first snowflake."

Till the end.

Painting and writing poetry were her passions. That talented lady painted a portrait of me as a five-year-old. It wasn't bad, but the fingers were too fat and short, and my ears were much too small. However, landscapes, like beaches with lighthouses and forests with streams and trees and flowers, she was wonderful at those. My favorite was a painting she did from memory of a little church on a hill in her little village, San Michele Church, St. Michael's.

"No more people. Stick to trees and sand and lighthouses," I recommended to her.

She laughed. She always laughed. The sound of her laughter made me feel safe. It was like, *nothing could harm us or break our hearts; it was just life...and life was good, life was full*. My grandmother tried to teach me to paint and garden and to believe in the beauty of the world. The coolest thing was that she rarely *told* me the answers and how to do things, leading me to the answer and having me discover the truth for myself. Most importantly, she knew how important my ghost hunt was for me and told me that, when the time was right, she'd help me find the truth. We just ran out of time.

WHY NOT?"

Rarely did I yell at my mom, but I must have been frustrated and scared. I just wanted to visit my Nonna at that stupid home, and she didn't want me to. How could I not visit her there? What would she think if I didn't show up?

"Because it's strange and scary at the nursing home. Your grandmother wouldn't want you to see her like that," Mom explained as she nervously pulled clean dishes out of the dishwasher. A plate fell to the floor and broke into shards.

"You know that I have to see her. What you're saying doesn't make any sense," I said, softening my harsh tone a bit.

"She probably won't even recognize you. You'll be a stranger to her, and that will break your heart," my mom answered in a fragile, quivering voice as she picked the pieces of broken plate off the floor.

Now I knew the gulf between the thought process of adults and teenagers was almost as wide as the gulf between how girls and boys looked at the world, but this idea that my grandmother would not, could not recognize me was incomprehensible. There were just things that I thought were absolute.

"Nonna won't forget *me*, Mom! How can you think such a thing?" I pleaded. I knew my mom was upset, and I was really trying to appreciate that, but there weren't a whole lot of reasons for me *not* to see my grandmother; actually, there were no reasons.

"I'm trying to protect you," she explained tearfully, as she placed the broken pieces into the trash, still not making eye contact with me.

"You don't have to protect me, Mom. I've got to be there for her," I said, bending over and picking up some stray pieces of the broken plate that she had missed. I thought to myself, *Easy now, Annie, watch your tone and what you say to Mom*. I hadn't seen her quite this upset since...dad died.

"She has all the care she needs there. People there are very good, very kind," she reassured me, holding out her hand to accept the pieces of plate.

"You've been there?"

"No, you know that I hate those places. I just know they take good care

of the patients. I checked it out before I allowed her to go there." A long pause followed. "I...I...can't see her like that. Annie, it's been four months since you've seen her. I didn't have the heart to tell you her condition," she confessed.

"That's why she didn't respond to my letters or answer her phone? So she wasn't away in Florida for two months?" I asked.

"I just said that to get your mind off her, Annie. She doesn't remember things and gets confused and angry." Mom put both of her hands gently upon my shoulders and kissed my forehead, just like she had right before she told me that my father had died.

"How could I *not* visit her? That's insane, Mom," I pleaded, starting to shake.

There was a pause as my Mom just stared at me, moving her hand up to cup my cheeks. I loved when she did that; her hands were so warm and reassuring. They made me feel safe, made me feel loved.

"You know, you have your Dad's shiny brown hair," she murmured, her eyes exploring my face.

"That's the Italian genes," I pointed out with a smile.

"And, there are a few little freckles..."

"Nonna said that my freckles were like my own constellation on my face. 'Annie the Angel' she called it."

"Got those from me," she sighed, gently touching each with her fingertip. "And those blue green eyes," she added, looking proudly into them as if taking credit for my features, which I guess she should, at least for fifty percent of them. I could feel her softening and coming around to accepting that I had the strength to deal with the changes in Nonna.

"Those are the Irish genes," I added.

Her mouth cracked into a subtle grin, eyes raised up and looking beyond me now. "Annie the Angel," she mused. "Your grandma was always right about things." Her eyes shot back to my face. "And your stubbornness, that's from me too. So, Annie the Angel, go on and visit her. Just know, sweetie, she's different now...very different. I don't want you to get hurt."

"Don't worry. I won't."

"You're stronger than me—always were—and more stubborn. I...I...just can't bring myself to see her like this." Her head turned away from me, and she walked out of the room.

It was hard to explain. My dad, my beautiful dad, had been killed while driving to pick me up from my Microscope Club meeting. A guy

was texting while driving and ran a red light, ending my dad's essence. After my father was killed in that accident, Mom kind of drifted away from Nonna a bit. I think it was hard to visit and be with her because it reminded Mom of dad. My mom was always a very sensitive woman, adored my father, and depended on him for so much.

I know she doesn't approve of me going to visit the nursing home, but I must, and deep down she knows that. I guess in the "Mom Playbook" there are things you feel obligated to say to your child. Then, there must be things you just know and understand and have to let go. My obsession with ghosts is something she doesn't approve of, and like everyone else, thought it was crazy — like I was tampering with something dark and evil. But she didn't forbid me. We just never talked about it.

I'm sure she will visit once in a while, much as it may pain her. Mom's a kind lady but hates the atmosphere in nursing homes, seeing all that suffering. It scared her. Me? I had never been. But I was about to find out.

§ § §

Wolfing down my breakfast, I tried to sneak out of the house before Mom came down. I knocked over my glass of grapefruit juice, however, and woke her up.

"So, I guess you're going," she said, wiping the sleep from her eyes with the palms of her hands. "Grandma may not recognize you and may act strangely toward you, getting terribly mad at you. And there are other patients there too who may make you feel uncomfortable."

"Yep," I returned coolly, girding for some resistance as I mopped up the grapefruit juice that puddled on the counter. The idea of her not recognizing me was unfathomable. I felt that I shared a soul with this woman. One quarter of my genetic code was given to me by my Nonna, but I felt that most of my soul, if not all of it, came from her. "She'll recognize me, Mom...she has to. I'm her *Annie*. She loves me...*More than to the moon and back again*, as she always told me."

My mom hugged me and kissed me warmly on the forehead. "Well, if she does remember anyone, it will be *her Annie*. Which glasses are you wearing today?"

I have this thing about glasses, especially round black ones. I always thought that they would make me look more scholarly. Probably part of my inspiration was Harry Potter. The problem was my eyes were perfect.

When I was eight years old, I complained to my mom and dad about my eyes. When my dad took me to the eye doctor for a checkup, I would lie about what letters I was seeing on the eye chart and would say numbers when he showed me letters. Even when they showed me the gigantic single letters, I would squint and say, "I think it's a bunny," because I wanted a pair of glasses so desperately.

My father and the doctor were astonished by how bad my vision seemed to be. Dad told me later that failing that test made me legally blind. I gave myself away when I noticed, on the doctor's desk, a 5x7 photo of his daughter wearing a tiny gold name necklace which most mortals would have needed a telescope to see.

"Hey! Her name is Annie too!" I chirped out with momentary pride and glee, pointing to the picture on the desk that was ten feet away.

My dad and the eye doctor both examined the photo, looked quizzically at each other and then sternly at me. Being grounded for a week was my punishment—no telescope, no microscope, for a dark, seven-day period. However, once my incarceration was over and I had learned the error of lying, my dad and I came to an agreement. I could wear glasses that had plain glass in them if I promised to always be honest with doctors, police officers, and teachers. The agreement left wiggle room for a few white lies with other people, because he knew that sometimes little fibs were just necessary in life.

"I've got the black frames today," I responded to my mom's query as I reached over across the stack of bagels to pick up the glasses and put them on. I had three pairs. I almost always wear the black ones, but I had a blue pair for when I was feeling depressed—although my friends say I look prettiest when I wear them—and a red pair for when I celebrate something amazing.

I rode my bike as fast as I could to the Sunshine Home. The place was actually a huge, old mansion. I had been afraid it would be like a hospital, but this place seemed special and comfy from afar. It was grand looking, with one of those witch's hat roofs on an upstairs room and a white picket fence surrounding the property. There was a flower garden. I knew Nonna would like that. When I looked over the fence, I saw two gray haired ladies sitting on the porch with a nurse seated between them. There was silence among the three of them as the nurse read to herself from a paperback book. I pulled hard on the gate, but it wouldn't budge.

"Can I help you, darling?" the nurse sweetly called out.

"Yes, I'm here to see my grandmother," I called over the gate.

"Your grandma's name?" she asked as she slowly stood up with one eye on me and the other on the two women on the porch.

"It's Antoinette Barone, but everybody calls her Toni."

"Ah, Toni. You just wait a second, sweetie. I'll open the gate for you."

The nurse stepped inside the house, and in the next second there was a buzzing sound and a big bar magnet released the gate, letting it swing open. "Make sure you close it tightly after you come in, dear. Some of our patients like to wander. They always think they're going home."

One of the ladies on the porch was in a wheelchair fast asleep, while the other eyed me suspiciously. "Are you my sister?" she asked sharply.

"No, Angelica, this little girl is Toni's granddaughter, not your sister."

"Is she here to bring me home?" the little lady asked with desperation.

"No, Angelica, she's here to visit Toni. You may go right in, dear. Your grandma's probably watching the television with the others."

Angelica must have been eighty years old. How could I have been her sister? That saddened me. I shyly stepped through the open door and gazed around nervously. It looked more like a boarding house than a hospital, which made me feel more at ease.

As I entered the house I stopped, drawn in by the beauty of the interior. To my left was a wide oak staircase that spiraled to a second and third floor; it brought to my mind a DNA molecule. An old, unused fireplace stood to my far right. It was made of granite stones and had a medieval feel to it. There was a sense that this had been a very ornate house for someone of great wealth and importance. The ceiling was painted like a blue sky with clouds and cherubs flitting about. Hanging from the walls in the living room were some large portraits of people I assumed were the original owners of this house, faces darkened by age.

"May I help you, dear?" a voice from behind me inquired.

When I turned, I saw another nurse waiting on me. "I... was just looking around. I'm here to visit with my grandmother, Toni. The lady on the porch said that I could come in, and I was immediately stuck by the beauty of this old house."

She beamed with pride and nodded. "It is beautiful, isn't it? It was owned by Sigmund Lupescu, a very rich coal baron in the 1800's. Edwina Lupescu, his very last direct ancestor, died in Paris twenty years ago after a long bout with dementia. The family donated it to the town for the care of dementia and Alzheimer's patients."

"Wow," I uttered, still gazing about with wonder. The woodwork, hardwood floors, and fireplace all seemed to be original. I would not have minded living here, if it weren't a place for old people.

"Yes, *wow* is what I said when I first saw it. They altered the room sizes and made some other changes for the good of the patients, but it still retains that old rich flavor."

"Rich," I responded, nodding, still in awe.

"Well, I'll let you get on with your visit. I always like to give new visitors a quick history of the house."

I walked into the living room where the patients were. As opulent as the first room was, the décor of the living room was simple, matching the fragility and confused state of the patients. They were mostly female patients with just a few males. Most were sitting on couches and chairs staring absently at a television that was much too loud. A few scurried around looking quite busy. Most looked old and feeble.

One of the women looked much too young to be there, about my mom's age...that was scary. I had once read about the elephant's burial ground, a place where elephants that were old or injured would journey miles and wait to die. That was just a myth, of course, but this house reminded me of that, these old people who had lost their way, collected here in a silent sadness, waiting.

There was a tug on my sleeve from behind. "Do you know where my pocketbook is?" a little gray-haired woman dressed in a purple robe asked.

"No, I don't believe I do," I said shakily, looking around for a nurse to come to my aid.

"Do you know where they hid my car's keys? You know they took my car away, and...I want it back!"

"I...I..." I stammered.

"Now, Emily, you leave that nice young lady alone." A third nurse quickly walked up to us and came to my rescue. "This girl doesn't know anything about your car. You were told not to worry about that car of yours."

"But I need it to go home. I'm going home tomorrow. How can I go home without my car?" she asked, her hands clutched together, as if begging.

"Well, you go to your room and pack, Emily, but leave this child alone."

Emily gave me a confused look. "You look like a nice girl. If you find my pocketbook, please give it to me."

"I...I will," I said nervously. Turning, she proceeded to go to her room to pack, I guess.

"That pocketbook's right there on her bed where she left it," the nurse said. "Always is. And they all think they're going home. They pack up what things they have, and we just unpack it for them minutes later after they've forgotten all about it. Poor souls, keeps them occupied. First time visiting here, honey?"

I nodded.

"Who are you here you see?"

"My grandma, Antoinette Barone."

"Antoinette? Oh! Toni. Sure. Your grandma's in her room. Just saw her a minute ago. Toni's...well..." She smiled. "She's in her room looking through her pocketbook. Room 6, honey."

"Thank you."

Walking down the hall, I peered curiously into the rooms on either side of me. They were very plain—just a bed, a bed stand, and a dresser. There were photos of grandchildren and children, faded black and white photos of the patients when they were young and healthy, photos of loved ones on the mirrors and walls, old black and white wedding photos, with cards and stuffed animals sitting on the dressers...reminders of who they once were. It was both very sweet and very sad. Then, a heavy hand fell upon my shoulder. I jumped away and turned to face the person who owned it. It was attached to a tiny bald man who seemed to be in his 70's.

"They're here you know. Don't let them fool you," he said, looking around suspiciously. He smiled and looked up at the ceiling and pointed. "They're here. They're not lost. Just look for them." Then he looked back at me, his smile turning flat. "Are you Benny, my brother? You're late, you know. I've been waiting for you for three weeks. You're going to take me home."

"No...no...no, I'm not Benny, I'm...I'm Annie," I said, turning my head away and peering down the hall, pointing towards room 6. "I'm Toni's granddaughter. I'm here to see Toni," I said as if that would stop him in his tracks and make him leave me alone.

"Now, now, Albert, there you go flirting with the pretty girls." Again, a caretaker came to the rescue. They were so diligent and omnipresent.

"Didn't you promise to help set the lunch tables?" she asked as if she were a teacher speaking to a little first grade scamp. A flick of her hand towards me was my signal to just walk on, which I happily did.

"They *are* here," Albert reassured me with a wink as he pointed all around us. Smiling, he obediently went off to help set the tables.

My original image was that the residents would just be cute and forgetful, but they were...acting odd, crazy, and immature. It was scary. Do I look like a Benny? It would be such a relief to see Nonna, after dealing with these people and their bizarre behavior. Sweet, dear Nonna. There she was sitting on her bed searching through her pocketbook.

"Hi, Nonna!" There was no recognition of me from her. Moving closer, I put my hand on her shoulder. "Hi, Nonna, it's me, Annie," I reassured her.

Her pocketbook fell to the floor, and she looked at me for a long moment trying to make sense of my face. Her eyes, still and probing, suddenly turned cold, and changed into two peering points of anger. Her face transformed before me into a hateful stranger.

"You! You and your sister! *You* put me here," she said with an icy, angry voice that I had never ever heard from her, even when she had been mad at me. "Where's my car! Where's my money!" she demanded, pounding her fist into her palm. Her face was contorted, and her voice was venomous. It frightened me.

"Nonna. It's me, Annie. Your Annie."

"Oh sure! I know. I'm not stupid. You did this to me. Look at this place! How would you like to be here?" Her hand slapped down onto her bed, and she stamped her foot hard onto the floor.

Who was this woman? Her anger was out of control. I had never seen her like this before, and it terrified me.

"You could have stayed with us, Nonna, that's what I hoped, but mom said that you need special...that you needed to stay here," I explained, inching away. I looked around the room and feigned enjoyment.

"It's a pretty room." It *was* actually kind of nice. There were a couple of her paintings and a few plants. There were photos of Kevin and me.

"Oh, shut up, you. It's a place for *old* people! Not me. I have my own place. I'm going home tomorrow. Where are my car keys? You took all my money! You took my life. I've worked hard all of my life and now... *this* is what I get?"

"Nonna," I choked out tearfully. "I didn't do anything to you. I love you. I'm Annie." I kept mentioning my name as if the sound of it would instantly heal her mind.

"You're like all the rest, spying and planning to take my money. I hear you at night and all the rest of them sneaking around! And now look at me!" Tears trickled down her cheeks, and she held her face in her hands. "I have *nothing* now," she said in hushed tones.

I wept too. "Oh, Nonna, please don't be sad," I implored. I moved forward and hugged her. This poor confused woman just continued to cry.

A voice once again came to my rescue. "Sweetie, it's time for your grandma's medication." It was a nurse with a cup of apple sauce. "Don't let her anger upset you. This poor lady's confused. It's the disease. It does terrible things to their minds. Deep inside, this woman has a heart of love for you."

"Oh, shut up!" Grandma shot back, sniffing back the last of her tears.

"Come on, Toni. After your applesauce, you're going to help me set the table." You could tell that this nurse was used to the anger and confusion of these poor people, and no matter how venomous my grandmother got, she just remained calm and patient.

"Go away!" Nonna screamed as she attempted to push me away. I put up my hands in self-defense and stepped back again. This woman was unrecognizable, looking so old, so angry, and so crazy. This couldn't be my Nonna. But it was. I knew it was; it was a nightmare.

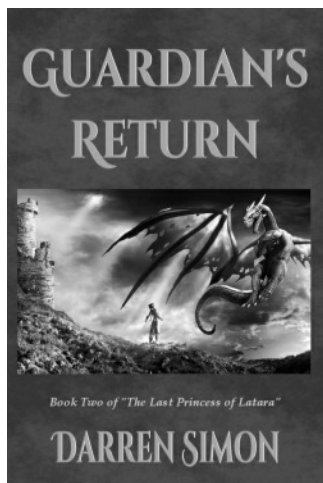
The nurse stood by me and put her hand reassuringly on my shoulder. "Happens a couple of times a day, sweetie. Then she can be as sweet as peach pie. In fact, *most* of the residents get a little anxious, especially in the evening. 'Sundown Syndrome' they call it. They feel they've lost everything. Well, I guess they have. Let your grandma be. Maybe she'll be better after lunch. Come back again another time to see her. You'll see. It'll be much better for the both of you."

Silently I nodded and backed out of the room. "Goodbye, Nonna," I mouthed. *Or whoever you are.*

At first, I was shocked and taken aback when Mom said that she hadn't visited Nonna, that she wanted to remember her the way she used to be and not the way she was now. I was warned, and now I got it. Now I understood.

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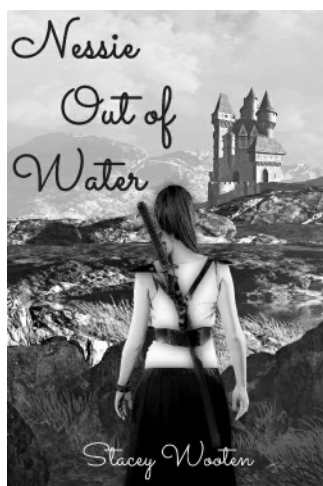
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Guardian's Return

by Darren Simon

Theodora lives, and if Charlee's dreams of death and fields of spilled blood are true, her great aunt has avenged herself on that world across the dimensional divide. Charlee knows what she must do. Can Charlee defeat Theodora—for good—or will evil consume her? Can she even survive so far from home? Her only hope may rest in the Lord of the Dragons, but that beast turned his back on her grandfather long ago...



Nessie Out of Water

by Stacey Wooten

Awkward situations usually find Nessie, a post-college secretary at a portable toilet rental company, like the love-crazed stalkers of a pubescent boy-band sensation. She has dealt with unstable roommates and the ever-present toaster salesman, but this one takes the cake...



Darkest Hour
by Tony Russo

After the Great War, a terrifying new enemy conquers much of Europe before turning its sights on Britain. All that stands between the unstoppable Black Legion and invasion is Briley and a handful of brave pilots. With its historical twists, surprising romance and heartfelt tragedy, *Darkest Hour* is the first of a series of truly unique and epic adventures.

"Hop in the back!" Caden anxiously directed.

We followed her order and got in. She was dressed in black pajamas with eye black under her eyes and black driving gloves. Atop her head was a black beret.

"What are you doing driving a car?" Anthony asked.

"Yeah, you're only fifteen," I added.

"It's my mom's car."

"You stole a car from your mom?" he squealed.

"Shush! I didn't steal it. I borrowed it. It's like a pet—it's a member of the family. Anyway, she's out playing bingo. The car was lonely."

Annie is fourteen-year-old girl who all her young life has believed firmly in the laws and principles of science...at the cost of Santa Claus and Tooth Fairies. If it wasn't measurable it didn't exist. But the death of her father and the aging of her beloved grandmother sends Annie on a quest to prove the existence of the paranormal, specifically ghosts, and thus an eternal soul.

Needless to say, there are many dead ends and frauds in her quest.

Will Annie's Goth friend Caden hold the answer to Annie's quest for the supernatural, or does the a haunted nursing home that has become her grandmother's residence as her Nonna is slowly enveloped by the shadow of Alzheimer's disease hold the key? Can science prove the existence of the unknown and that they're here, or will it take a little faith...



About the Author: Steve Pricone was born in Paterson, New Jersey in 1950. He authored 15 plays for children and teens published in PLAYS magazine, as well as the humorous cookbook, *Who Stepped on the Duck a l'Orange?* and *The Adventures of Young Thomas Edison*, a science activity book. He retired after 41 years teaching science at Riverdale Public School and Don Bosco Tech in New Jersey and currently teaches STEM science part-time at St. Dominic's School in Brick, New Jersey. He resides in Lakewood with his wife Michele.



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