

Purple Shroud

By Diane Nelson

“Come on, now, you two. Get in the van. It’s getting late.”

“Grandma? Why can’t I stay and play with Amy?”

“Because we have somethin' special to do. Somethin’ I want for you both,” I paused, not having words right to hand, “to experience.”

I hoped that was good enough. I had no truck with children, never did. These two vexed me in ways I never thought possible. Lots of things I never thought possible, least ways what I needed to do today.

“Alright, all of you ... in.”

Sammy hauled herself in first, then reached a hand to her brother, carefully guiding him over the step-up and onto the bench seat. She fussed and adjusted his seatbelt before tending to her own.

“Gram, where we going anyways?” This from Jacob. He might not always understand his world but he had a way of cottoning to when things weren’t quite up-to-par. Of the two of them, he was the one who worried me, what with his strange ways and uncanny kind of knowing. I heard them, the social workers who came round every so often to justify the government’s interest, they’d whisper a thing and I’d have to think hard on it but after a while it began to make sense. Jacob could intuit so I hung that word on my line to fly in the breeze a bit, letting it air some „fore I hauled it in, folded it up and stored it away.

Jacob was special, legally blind, though I’d noticed him “seeing” things, things I’d not notice and it’d bring me up short, make me sweat some.

“Gram?” Sammy this time. She was the quiet one, bookish, proper-like for a girl, respectful, I liked her for that, though she had a way about her too. Older, more a parent to the boy than his real ones had ever been.

“We’re going up to Black Moshannon.”

Sammy’s voice brightened some and made me cringe. “The lake, Grams?”

I pulled into the empty parking lot. I was surprised that we were the only ones tonight. It was a fair night for canoeing, the air'd cooled off enough to keep the bug count down. I angled the van so's we could set up by the boat ramp, our chairs and the cooler would go on the short dock. It was a lot of detail for me

to work out on such short notice but I done my best. Better than they woulda managed, that's for sure.

Sammy undid her brother's harness and stepped out first, carefully placing her hands on his waist and easing him down onto the gravel. I let Sammy guide her brother while I grabbed stuff outta the back of the van, lugging it all to the edge, looking for just the perfect spot. We needed exactly the right angle or it wouldn't work. I scanned the low lying clouds, gunmetal gray against the soft mound of the distant ridge. The water sat ripply calm, lettin' the setting rays skitter cross it like some giant paint brush, trailing a wash of orange and pink, lighting it from above and below.

Jacob sat on the edge of the dock, dangling his feet. I left him to it. I wanted my chair, old bones didn't rise up so well, but it seemed fitting to join the boy on the edge, closer to the water, feeling the cool.

The sun eased down, faster than I expected so my words came out in a rush, which was a mercy for I had little in my heart for them right now, too tied off with my own ache.

"Watch now. You'll see it." They nodded obediently, not sure, but looking off to the distant shore, expectant.

I pulled the letter, the final one, the one that changed everything. And I read. Jacob nodded in time to my words, as they came harsher than I wanted. Sammy sat rigid, then pulled her brother close, wrapping him tight, more than I could ever do.

"If you watch now, see it going down, there'll be a flash, a flare. It's them saying goodbye to you." I leaned around Jacob sitting close to my left side, but not touching, and knew what he knew, clear as day. But I was more curious about her.

"What do you see, Samantha?"

"Death," she muttered, stretching it out, owning it. "They don't have this over there, do they Grams?"

"No, it's all desert there."

Desert and guns and missiles that robbed me and mine of my daughter and her career-man, useless excuse of a husband, with no right, none, dragging her over there. Not her fight, not mine, not theirs. Now they're both gone, leaving me to deal.

I bumped shoulders with the boy. He was staring, odd, like he saw something.

"Jacob?" Samantha echoed me, the whisper a shushing sound over the water.

The boy pointed at the ridge and drew a line, rising, falling, rising—tracing a shape I recognized. A

chill settled along my spine. He knew the truth of it, I was sure.

“Angels, Gram. I see them, the wings.” His small fingers outlined the clouds’ edges, then plummeted to the center, just above the sun, pulsing one last beat. The sky yielded to a deep purple shroud, as the golden orb vanished.

“Mom’s with them, Gram.” I nodded though I knew he couldn’t see it.

To his sister, “Where’s Dad, Sammy?”

She looked at me, stony-faced. She wasn’t going to help me with this one.

I muttered, “Somewhere else. Come on now, pack up.”

Sammy took Jacob’s hand but he hesitated, waiting for me to catch up.

“What did you see, Grams?”

Samantha stood, head bowed, waiting. My time with them would be short. That was the thing I knew, so it mattered what I said. Too much so. There would still be time for truth later. Sammy heard my breath catch, nodded and gave me leave for the lie.

“Nothing, boy. Just a setting sun.”

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