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Bone Magic

By Ilse Eskelsen

Magic lived in my grandmother's hip. Her left hip, deep down in the bone, in the bit that bordered her thigh.

She said she felt it like a hot pulse. Like a smoldering drum. Bum pah pah, bum pah pah. That was magic.

Other grandmothers knew in their knee joints or their wrist bones or their ankles when it was going to rain. My grandmother knew in her hip when the next-door neighbor was going to get diagnosed with liver cancer. She knew what the ladybugs were whispering as they roamed over the pot of alfalfa that sat on her windowsill. She knew how to use the alfalfa to cure the liver cancer, and she knew the neighbor wasn't going to be interested.

She made the poultice anyway and left it on his porch with a nice note and a plate of brownies. The neighbor returned both the poultice and the brownies with an equally nice note and a hotel Bible.

I always thought that part was funny because my grandmother was quite possibly the most God-fearing person I knew. John and Susannah sometimes attended one of those churches that came with a drum kit and a youth pastor, mostly because they felt that children ought to grow up with a moral system. My grandmother, however, was a proper Baptist. She went twice a week, every week. I wasn't even sure if Baptists could go twice a week, but she did. Sometimes, I imagined her in the little chapel with the pale wood pews and the pale wood walls and the pale wood cross at the front, sitting alone in the stained-glass dimness, one hand tracing a verse in her red leather Bible, the other on her hip. Her left hip, the bit that bordered her thigh.

I joined her at church most Sundays, bicycling over in the mornings while the rest of my house drowsed. My grandmother fed me turkey bacon breakfasts with poppyseed muffins the size of both my fists, then shooed me upstairs to shower and put on one of my mother's old dresses. The whole day, I would smell like her homemade shampoo and hard soap—lemon and ginger and something faintly vegetable—and look like an eighties-style pioneer girl, two wet French braids flopping down my back. My mother had done her hair that way when she was my age. Sometimes I thought my grandmother forgot I was my own and not a newer, younger version of my mother. After church, we tended to the garden. My grandmother always called it "tending," which had something to do with her romantic vocabulary and something to do with the way she would press two fingers to her hip after watering the azaleas. Her left hip. The bit that bordered her thigh.

I did what she termed the "back-breaking work," which for a long time meant mainly weeding and wrangling the hose. Later, though, as I got bigger and she got smaller, she had me doing the little things, too, until she would sit in a plastic lawn chair and watch me tend her garden for hours at a time. It was possible she was getting weaker. But part of me thought it might be punishment for no longer fitting into most of my mother's dresses.

In the evenings, while John flipped vegan burgers for the kids back home and Susannah assembled delicate salads, my grandmother drew warm strings of meat from the crock pot and served them with thick buttered bread. While we ate, she would tell me about her life, cities she'd lived in and jobs she'd worked and children she'd buried.

And sometimes, sometimes, if I was lucky, she'd tell me about the magic. The logic of a potion, the framework of a spell, the architecture of a curse. Dreams she'd had and runes she'd cast and miracles she'd made.

Most things, though, I learned from implication. From experience.

Magic was a faint scent of fennel drifting from the locked-up master bathroom. It was strange chalked shapes she made me draw on the cellar floor. It was cold wind against a candle that refused to go out, soft frost on green grass in the middle of summer, the vital, never-ending throb in my grandmother's hip. Bum pah pah, bum pah pah. Hot pulse and smoldering drum.

It was how she knew she was dying. I was washing the dishes after dinner, looking out the window at the six o'clock dusk, putting off the bike ride home. My grandmother sat at the table, head bowed over her clasped hands.

I thought she was praying, but then she said, "Oh, let that alone. Come. I'll paint your nails."

Relieved, I joined her at the table and extended my hands. She had a pot of pearl-pink polish set out already and the glossy topcoat, too. My grandmother drew the brush from the pot with intense caution. Her fingers shook. I flinched as drops of polish stained the tablecloth and the skin of my fingers like bubblegum blood.

"Your mother loved this color," she murmured.

I watched her paint my fingers pink and made a noncommittal sound deep in my throat.

"Your mother was a witch, you know."

"Like you?"

She reached my pinkie finger, striped it with color, and sighed. "Better."

I frowned. "John says the two of you didn't get along."

My grandmother replied, "Well, your father's always been a liar."

She did not say that that particular comment had been a lie.

"Why do you always bring her up?" I asked, a little annoyed at what she'd said, though I knew she wasn't wrong.

My grandmother moved to my other hand. "Because you were supposed to be like her."

I snatched back my hand. The interrupted brush trailed polish on the tablecloth.

"Grandma, I'm my own person."

Calmly, she replied, "I know. You didn't let me finish."

I waited.

"You were supposed to be like her," she repeated. "Better than me."

Oh.

I thought about the potions, the spells, the curses. The dreams and the miracles. The burn in her bone.

Magic lived in my grandmother's hip, but it didn't live in her only granddaughter at all.

"I should go home," I said, so conscious of my mundane self, my common-made flesh.

"John and Susannah will be getting worried."

This was a lie, a lie because despite everything she'd taught me and everything I wanted to be, I couldn't help but take after my father.

"Let me finish your nails," my grandmother said.

I let her because I loved her and because I knew she forgave me for never being the thing she'd lost. When I left, I kissed her cheek and waved goodbye to the ladybugs on the alfalfa.

The next day, we learned she'd had a heart attack and died on her bedroom carpet. I sat at the end of a pale wood pew at her funeral, a red leather Bible on my lap. I wore a black dress that had belonged to my mother. My nails were painted a pearly pink. A week later, I let myself into her house to tend the garden. The bottles of nail polish still sat on the kitchen table beside a candle that had not gone out. I put the polish in my pocket and saw, with some surprise, a package wrapped in brown paper, labeled with my name. It had been left in the spot where I usually set my plate. I unwrapped the package with intense caution. My fingers shook. Inside was a hip bone, bleached white and all clean. It smelled like lemon and ginger and something faintly vegetable. It was a left hip, and deep down in the bone, in the bit that would've bordered the thigh, I heard or felt or knew a throb. A hot pulse. A smoldering drumbeat. Bum pah pah, bum pah pah. Magic.