

Eric Seiley
Burning Bridges As We Go
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Four Magic Places

Colfax

I was sent to live with my grandmother after Mom was taken back to the psychiatric hospital on Streblow Road again. That was seven months ago. I was fifteen, frightened, and way in over my head - unsure how to survive what was to come next. So I started writing everything down, keeping a record in case things went from bad to worse. Or maybe just to reassure myself what was happening was really happening and I wasn't just...you know, crazy too.

There were warning signs before Mom was taken away. Strange music she liked to play on the record player in the living room while she danced in weirdly ritualistic ways – heavy vinyl albums without labels or markings of any kind to identify. Angular dances that didn't have rhyme or reason to their movement. Or, at night when she thought I was asleep, I could hear eerie voices coming from the den, but I never saw Mom, nor anyone coming or going from the house. Or the times I would wake up to hear her whispering just outside my bedroom door. That scared me most.

"Mom, please take your Seroquel. And the Zyprexa the doctor ordered. Just these pills here, please," I begged. "They'll help."

"No, honey, I'm on a higher plane now. I don't need them," she replied.

"Mom, please. You don't act so....you don't go out into the woods at night when you take your medication. And you don't talk out loud to yourself. You haven't bathed in a

month. Or cooked, or gone to work, or driven me to school or anything. I don't want you to get too far out there. You know what will happen if you do."

"Don't worry, honey. I'm just in transition. Getting back to my true self. I know what I'm doing. Plus, those medications evaporated from the power of my thoughts and are gone. They can't return."

"Mom. Please."

"It'll become clear soon, Sukie. Just wait and see. My mind is healing everything. It made the medication disappear and now is clarifying my thoughts because of it. I can see everything now. It's as much for you as for me."

I was afraid to ask what she meant. Mostly I was afraid *for* Mom rather than afraid *of* her. But still, when she went off her meds this long, it could get scary. There had been incidents.

The final straw, which prompted the neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Briggs, to call the police, began the morning Mom returned from one of her nighttime walks all worked up.

"I figured it out, Sukie! I finally broke through and now my path is clear."

"Figured what out, Mom?" I asked.

"No time to explain. I have work to do."

I stayed home from school cause I could tell things were going to get bad. Much worse than the last time and I hoped I might be able to run interference.

I haven't always been my mother's caretaker. There was a time when we were normal and Mom behaved normal. Well, normal-ish. She would take me to school after my father left for work. Pick me up. Play with me in the park, bake cookies for the PTA, and even cook dinner while my father helped me with my homework in the

evening. We were a nice little family and the epitome of three being a magic number. Yet there was always something a little different about Mom too. Things she did other mother's didn't. But nothing too distressing like now.

"Your mom is sooooo cool!" Mary Ann Little squealed to our Girl Scout troop the Saturday afternoon Mom took us backstage to meet Megan Trainor before her concert at the Civic.

"Right this way girls," Mom said, "Don't be afraid. You should never let a sign dictate where you can and cannot go." She said this as we all passed the "No Unauthorized Personnel" sign posted backstage in front of the dressing rooms.

Where other mother's would never dare, my Mom did. This particular Saturday, she walked right up to the black suited manager guarding Megan's door, whispered quietly to him, and disappeared for a little while into another room. When she returned she was holding full access passes for us all. We got to watch the concert from the wings, sing along with "*X's and O's*" like we were Megan's backup singers, and visit with her in her dressing room after. Megan turned out to be really nice and took as many pictures with us as we wanted.

I was very popular with the other girls for a short time after that. Fielding at least two "slumber party" requests a week. Mom was popular too, but not in the same way or with the other Girl Scout mothers. No. By consensus, they agreed no girl scout would ever hang out or be allowed to sleep at our place again. Especially after that concert.

"My mom doesn't think your mom is very cool anymore is why," Mary Ann Little commiserated. "I'm not even allowed to *walk* by your house. Totally unfair."

The little differences were always there, but more pronounced when Mom went off her meds. She became much more elevated and difficult to handle if things progressed too far.

"Don't you like this color, Sukie?"

"Mom, I don't think you should be painting the neighbor's house without their permission. The color of it doesn't matter. Mrs. Briggs told us last time we need to stay on our side of the fence because her husband gets really upset when you don't."

"Oh what do they know? Their spirits are as flat as that poor woman's ass in those stupid mom jeans. And she doesn't even have kids. She's about as pedantic as a banana slug and will never soar. I feel sorry for her."

Mom declared all this while painting the neighbor's house sky powder blue. Well, not the entire house. Just the side you could see from our kitchen window.

"Blue is a calming color. A primary color. Much more attractive for deeper dwelling spirits than this hideous yellow they have.

"Mom, please," I begged. "This isn't going to end well."

"Sukie, you are just way too uptight. It's my fault really. I could've taught you about all the magic we create for ourselves in this world. The way we bring our deeper spirits out. I should have, but your father wanted you to be....well, he wanted you to experience life in the 'normal' world. Claimed it was safer. And I let him. I loved him so I tried it his way. That's why I took the meds too, you know."

"Mom, I don't know what you mean. I never understand what you're talking about when you go off your medications. Maybe I should call Dr. Patterson and schedule you an appointment."

"No, Sukie, don't do that. You're a sweet girl and I appreciate you trying to look out for me. I'm almost finished. Here, I'll stop. I'm just trying to find my way back to my real self. You can understand that right?"

"I guess so."

Fifteen minutes later, I was writing an apology letter to the neighbor explaining what happened, when my mother took off.

"I'll be back in an hour, Sukie," she called as she headed out the front door.

I wasn't quick enough to catch her and didn't know where she went. An hour later she returned.

"Mom, why did you buy all this meat from the grocery store? Holy cow," I gulped when I looked at the grocery bill, "you spent five thousand dollars?! Do we even have that? Why did you buy so much?"

"It's too portentous a day," she pronounced, "to be eating dead flesh without realizing the harm being ingested. The spirit of these animals can live if you know how to harness their energy. I intend to help them live."

In the backyard, she dug a hole and buried the lot, cellophane wrappers and all, under a thin layer of dirt while chanting an incantation over the mound. How steaks and pork chops and ground beef were supposed to live again I had no idea. But, the neighbor's dogs, twin Pitbulls named Trigger and Happy, weren't so ambivalent. They picked up the meat scent, went berserk, and started jumping at the fence trying to bust through to the meat. And Mom must have felt responsible because she grabbed Dad's chainsaw from the garage and cut down a six foot section of fence that separated our yards. She later told the police it was because the dogs needed to be "free in their natural state."

"Dogs don't like captivity. None of us do. Remember I said that," Mom advised.

When the neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Briggs, came home – Mr. Briggs being this big, burly mechanic who'd already had enough of my mother's "hippie-dippy ways" during the year he and his wife lived next door to us – and discovered all she had done, he went nuts.

“Son of a bitch. Son...of...a....*motherfuckin’ BITCH!*” Mr. Briggs said blinking it all in. The paint, the destroyed fence, his beloved pit bulls digging in the dirt chomping down on plastic wrapped ground beef, the mess of it all.

“Son of a *motherfuckin’, unholy bitch,*” he yelled stomping over to Mom and continuing his obscenity laced protest that the police - later in similar blinking fashion - felt might’ve been justified considering all Mom had done. Or at least not outside the realm of their sympathies.

It got worse when Mr. Briggs continued to intimidate Mom with, “Listen, *bitch,* I’ll knock you into next week!” Then she decided she’d had enough of his bad attitude and stepped up to deliver a powerful jab-jab-overhand right that knocked two of his front teeth out and sent him sprawling back on his grease stained, Carhart clad bottom.

“*Son of a bitch?!*” Mr. Briggs gurgled bleeding from the mouth and looking down in surprise at his two knocked out teeth. “*Son of a....*”

Mrs. Briggs just ran screaming into the house when Mom turned and looked at her.

“Now that will be just about enough of that, you Neanderthal,” Mom said to Mr. Briggs.

Mom might not have looked like much, but Mr. Briggs had just learned she was a solid featherweight who learned to box from her father. Him having been ranked with the Golden Glove Boxing Federation since before the war.

“You’re crazy,” Mr. Briggs sputtered, “I’m callin’ the cops.”

“Be rude again,” my mother replied, “and not only will I sit you back down on your fat ass, but I’ll curse your balls so they shrivel up and shrink to nothing. Not that you actually have any to shrink, you ignorant behemoth!”

The police, when they arrested her, were much more gentle and respectful placing her into custody.

“Don’t forget to look after our friends, Sukie,” Mom reminded me as the police led her away in handcuffs. “They will be lonely without me. And make sure Boots doesn’t push Kittie-Kittie around. He can act like a real bear.”

“I will, Mom.”

Before she was sent away, Mom liked to care for the animals who roamed the forest out back of our house. There were daily assortments of mice, squirrels, cats, rabbits, skunks, possums, and the occasional deer visiting our backyard because Mom claimed she could summon them. She also seeded tons of Kibble & Bits along the tree line to draw in the animals and make our backyard look like a scene from Bambi most days.

After she was arrested, I didn’t have the heart to tell her all her animal friends were scattered back to the woods. Animal Control captured the cats, dropped deer repellent pods throughout the back yard to drive out the rest, and threw away all the food. Like Mom, they were sent away, not likely to return. And if Mom had known, she would’ve been upset and lashed out. Which could’ve been dangerous.

Sierra Tucson

With Mom at the state psychiatric hospital for the long haul, at least according to her newly appointed, vaguely uptight psychiatrist, Dr. Singh, it was determined by people I’d never met that I could go live with my grandmother as soon as arrangements could be made. They wouldn’t let me see Mom before then to say goodbye but did give me permission to meet with Dr. Singh for something called a “goal’s conference” before I left.

“Your mother,” Dr. Singh explained, “has a very deeply fixated presentation of, well, its official diagnosis is paranoid schizophrenia with hypomanic features, but we know different don’t we, dear. She’s still your mother. She’s just a little troubled at the moment.”

She winked at me. I didn’t like it.

“Unfortunately, your mother has also decompensated to a very acute level. Disorganized with magical thinking and deeply fixed delusions. We need to be more aggressive with medication and refocus her back to a tangible reality paradigm. Get her stable and at her baseline.” Another wink. “I have just the treatment in mind. Don’t worry, my dear, I will take good care of your mother. And when the time is right, I will return her to you. Though not too soon. We wouldn’t want this kind of break in her reality matrix to happen again.”

My newly assigned social worker, who had come along for the meeting – a round, squat woman with the unusual name Ziophena, who smelled like she bathed in peppermint – was much more circumspect.

“Don’t worry darlin’,” Ziophena commiserated, “These things happen. They take a little time to adjust to, but I’m sure the universe will manifest on your behalf. You just need to align yourself and good outcomes will materialize.”

“Well, in this universe anyway, I am truly sorry for your troubles,” replied Dr. Singh while looking irritated by Ziophena. “I’m also afraid you won’t be able to visit with your mother before you leave. She is still quite acute and violent. I had the team place her into seclusion after she hurt one of my staff over her hold being extended and her learning she wouldn’t be allowed to leave. I do have one more question though. There’s no mention in any of her previous medical records and I could use some confirmation from an outside source.”

"Yes?" I asked.

"When did your mother first claim she was a witch and start performing rituals of witchcraft?"

"What? Witchcraft? Never! She's never said or done anything like that."

"Are you sure? She's been claiming pythoiness status since she got here, speaking rituals, and insisting she will be fulfilling her potential very soon. It's obvious she's been acting on this belief for some time. Which may be at the heart of her troubles. She has me a bit worried with how tenacious she is about the apochryphetic aspects of her "power" returning. Maybe your father could provide a little clarity on the matter?"

"Sure, only he died in a car accident," I replied. He'd actually died two years ago while Mom was arguing with Dad over taking us to lunch after my Saturday soccer game. Mom, who was driving, turned her Toyota Sierra van directly into the path of a large delivery truck cause she was distracted and Dad was the first to feel the impact. But I wouldn't be telling Dr. Singh that.

"Oh," said Dr. Singh, "When was this? It wasn't in her files." She stared daggers at my social worker.

"Two years ago," I said.

"Well, I'm sorry. I didn't know. Such things can be hard," she said winking at me again. "I am led to understand you will be going to your grandmother's in Oklahoma, if that is correct." Again looking over at Ziophena. "I do hope things go better there. Thank you for coming in. I will let you know when your mother is ready for a visit. Goodbye," Dr. Singh said checking her notes, "umm, Sukie. Yes, Sukie. Goodbye."

She then stood and left while Ziophena, my peppermint social worker, drove me to the bus station.

“Here you are, my dear, safe and sound,” Ziophena sang out handing me a ticket and gesturing to a Greyhound bus preparing to leave the parking lot. Before I got on though, she mumbled something under her breath, touched the side of the bus, and warned me I was to stay on the bus till reaching Oklahoma’s Glinda station at Idabel where my grandmother would pick me up. That was as far as her efforts to “protect me” extended.

“That’s Glinda, dear. G-L-I-N-D-A,” the peppermint social worker spelled out like I was a five year old. “Just like the good witch of the west, you see?”

“Good witch, right,” I thought. In some ways, Ziophena reminded me a little of my mother. Not in the looks department, but the unusual approach both seemed to take toward life. I knew Ziophena meant well, and she seemed harmless enough, so all I said in return was, “Oh, okay” before taking the ticket and boarding the bus to travel over hill and dell to Grandmother’s house.

Thank goodness Grandmother was no stranger. Gran always visited us in California staying with Mom, Dad, and me from Christmas to New Years since the time I was little. And Mom and Dad always took me back to Oklahoma every summer to stay with Gran and Granddad for a month so she and Dad had could take time to “rekindle” their marriage and keep things “fresh.”

Gran was the first to fly in after Dad died. Grandad had also passed by then so things between Mom and Gran hadn’t gone well. They argued a lot about keeping me without family in California leading to Mom angrily threatening Gran.

“I won’t have you undermining me like you did when I young,” Mom yelled, “Or have you questioning my parenting decisions! Claiming to know what’s best! My husband

is here! Sukie's father is here! Our place is here with him! I know what's best for Sukie! And for me!"

"Yes, dear, of course. But, forgive me for saying, but staying here alone to be near...well, the cemetery, does neither you nor Sukie any good. Come home with me and you can still visit him any time you like."

"How dare you! I will not abandon my husband. You haven't left yours, so why do you think I will mine. My place is here with him! I think you need to leave! If you don't, you know what will happen."

Gran knew Mom well enough to leave. But before she did, she made sure I knew I could go with her. Just say the word and she'd make sure of it. I admit I really wanted to go. To run from California and Dad's death and Mom's moods. But I felt guilty. How could I do that and not hurt Mom in the process by abandoning her. And if Mom wouldn't go, what choice did I really have? So I told Gran I would be okay and everything would be fine. But I would call her if I needed.

In my room that night, after Mom drove Gran to the airport, I began developing a plan that would ensure Mom and I could leave California and move to Oklahoma.

Updike Hollow at Idabel

"Ho, there young lady!" Gran called out tapping me on the shoulder.

"GRAN!" I exclaimed, "how'd you do that?" She'd surprised me by walking up from behind on an otherwise empty platform in the middle of nowhere, USA. When I turned around, she opened her arms out wide.

"It's so good to see you! Now, give me a hug."

As soon as I fell into her arms and felt her warmth and love, I relaxed. I hadn't realized how on edge I'd been for so long. It also surprised me to discover I'd grown a few inches taller since the last time Gran visited and now towered over her.

"You've grown taller. I've grown wider," Gran laughed. Gran had never been particularly thin, but she'd never been as plump as she was now. It took a little getting used to.

"All those *Nutter Butter* cookies!" Gran laughed when she noticed me noticing her added weight. "And Stan's boy down at the market – he started doing that "Grub Hub" delivery thing – doesn't mind late night milk and cookie deliveries to my door cause I tip so well. Grub Hub and Nutter Butters will be the death of me!"

With her added weight and signature garden hat, overalls and pink kitchen apron, Gran looked more jolly than usual and reminded me of one of those Fairy Godmothers from *Sleeping Beauty*. Flora, I think her name was.

"How's your mother, Sukie. Any new news? That Dr. Singh still won't let me speak with her. Something about *Hippa* not allowing it. I'm not sure what a hippopotamus has to do with anything, but it wouldn't surprise me with those California doctors."

"Not good, Gran. She was locked down when I left for hurting other people. It doesn't look good."

"Oh dear. That bad, huh. Well, you're here now and that is a joy. We'll see what we can do for your mom after we get you settled."

I grabbed my backpack and followed Gran over to her truck for the drive out to her home. Gran lived outside town on twenty-seven acres along the Elphaba River in a giant Victorian house the locals referred to as "an English Prairie Oasis." Which is to say a big house surrounded by a large garden centered in a huge expanse of wide open

land with a single country road leading both in and out. Idabel was the closest town twenty miles southwest and Eastwick forty miles to the northeast. With the nearest big city, Tulsa, clear on the other side of the state. Updike Hollow was a special place and had been an oasis for many people in the area once upon a time.

Coming in sight of the house, Gran sang out, "Welcome back to Updike Hollow, Sugar. You've been missed."

Updike Hollow had always lived in my memory as the one place I felt most at home. And for good reason. A huge open air botanical garden overflowing the white picket fences surrounding it, with a tall spired, three story Victorian sitting smack in the middle of all that jungle seemed like a castle rising out of the wilderness. Outside, plants, bushes, and trees competed for space with pathways walking in and around the garden in all directions, winding under cypress trees, meandering past elm, guiding around Azalea and Hedera, creating secret little enclaves throughout the entire property. Gran's giant Elm rose out front with a rope swing her own Pa hung up for her before he left during the Great Depression. And throughout the gardens, orchids and passion flowers intertwined with achiote and heliconia, along with rosemary, nasturtium, and fennel, lifting the fragrance of flowers into the air like the sweetest air you ever smelled. Everything in overlapping harmony, all leading around to the back of the house where the back porch was. The back porch was the real prize. A central island safe from the riotous garden. From the back porch, you sat on padded Adirondack chairs deep in the shade -- listening to the birds and wind chimes or to an old Victrola Grandpa brought back from Europe -- drinking sweet tea Gran liked to make by the pitcher for evening gatherings. From the deck you could look out over the back fields filled with long acres of beautiful, symmetrical rows of corn, and watch the sun go down with Gran's scarecrow and a dozen crows hanging around. In the evenings, we danced and sang on the back porch. Or played board and card games. Or

sat and talked about the day and life and the family and the weather and the news and the Farmer's Almanac.

It was a magical place. Everybody loved it there. Gran and Grandpa were always hosting a dozen or so visitors each evening. And Sundays were generally off the hook cause Grandpa liked gatherings and often asked friends and family over after church. Which went on for a long while till Grandpa up and died a year before Dad.

I loved it at Updike Hollow and always wanted to make it my home. Ever since I was a little girl. I even asked Dad once why we didn't, but he just said it was better for Mom to be in California and refused to explain further.

Inside Updike Hollow, the house was equally dense and rapturous with vegetation. Every room held pots of English ivy, monstera, maidenhair ferns, and succulents along with a variety of spices and herbs occupying just about every shelf, countertop, and windowsill. Sunlight streamed through every window mesmerizing and pleasant. It often occurred to me that Gran's place was obviously why my mother liked being so close to nature.

"I changed your room to downstairs, Sugar. It's not what you would've picked, but I hope you don't mind," Gran said leading me along a short first floor hallway to a room on the east side of the house where it tended to be cooler. "With it being just me most of the time now, I've closed down the rest of the house. I didn't get a chance to open your old room upstairs yet or get it ready. But now that you're here, if you like, we can get the top floors tidied up and active again if you like. Your old friends, Bethany and Jane, are still around. We can call them for a good old fashioned sleepover. I know they would love to see you."

"Maybe. I might like that. But not right now."

"Of course. In the meantime, I hope you don't mind staying down here near me. My room is right across from yours."

I was about to reassure Gran that whatever room she'd picked would be perfect when I noticed her take an ancient skeleton key from her apron pocket and unlock the door to the room first.

"Gran," I asked in alarm, "Are you going to lock me in?"

"No," she chuckled, and her blue eyes twinkled, "No, but sometimes locked doors are the best way I've found to keep nosy spirits out. You can hear them creaking and moaning all about the upstairs well into the attic. It happens when you have a house this big house. Especially during the winter months when those recently passed can't help themselves from visiting and trying to butt into your business."

"Nosy ghosts? You sound like Mom."

"Well, I tell you, Sugar, there's some truth to that. My own Ma used to talk about the spirit world and all those lost souls trapped in the places between heaven and earth. And hell too I suppose. When I was a little girl, she and her friends even used to hold séances up in the attic while my own Daddy was away looking for work during the Great Depression. But he put a stop to all that when he came home. He didn't like..." Here Gran stopped talking noticing my face, "Oh look at me babbling on. You look so tired from all your travels. And you must be hungry!"

"Yes, Gran, I sure am." She was right. I was glad to be there but felt bone tired like I could fall asleep standing up. And it had been days since I'd eaten anything but Pringles and beef jerky or drank anything but Diet Coke. I was hungry for some real food and desperate to rest on a comfortable bed.

“Why don’t you put your things away in the room, get settled, and wash up. I’ll get lunch started.”

Gran was right, the room was not what I'd have chosen. But it was light and airy, with a nice breeze fluttering through the big open bay window that faced over the east garden. I could smell cypress trees and some kind of spicy herb, which I think was coriander, complementing the lavender ivy vines stretching here and there outside the window. Dropping my bags, I looked around the room noticing how the white comforter was heavily embroidered with purple violets and the large pillow covered in the same. An antique vanity with mirror and more flowers, along with a wardrobe rather than closet, completed the Victorian garden style motif of the room. The entire house, in fact, felt like one giant, soothing Elizabethan garden cave.

I laid on the bed and closed my eyes. And the next thing I knew, I woke up in the dark with moonlight pouring through the open window and a strange black crow sitting on the tree outside staring in at me.

“It’s rude to stare, Mr. Crow,” I said sitting up, rubbing my face, and stretching. For some reason, I thought of my mom when I said that, felt a shiver, and prayed she was okay.

Gran must’ve heard me stirring cause she tapped on the door a moment later and called in, “I hate to wake you Sugar, but its dinner time! You had quite a nap. Are you hungry?”

"Oh, Gran, I'm sorry. I don't usually take such long naps. I'll be right out."

"No rush, Sugar, travel is exhausting. And I'm sure you needed the rest."

Gran’s Kitchen

After washing up, I met Gran in the kitchen as she was setting two bowls of homemade soup on the table along with a small plate of freshly baked bread and butter that smelled so good my mouth began watering. Two glasses of milk and a plate of Nutter Butter cookies followed.

"Oh, Gran, this looks really good. I hope you didn't go to too much trouble."

"No, not at all, Sugar. It's nice to have someone to cook for again."

Before we sat down though, Gran took out the key again from her apron and locked the kitchen door behind us. Coming back to the table, she noticed the concerned look on my face and cajoled, "It's okay dear. It's a big house and I've been living here alone for some time. Seems as you get older, all the creaking, moaning, and groaning throughout the house wears a bit thin on the nerves. I feel more comfortable when I can lock doors behind myself. Nothing to worry about though. We'll get the house open and aired out within a couple of days. Breath life back into the old girl."

"Was it like that when Mom lived here?"

"For a while. The house was always big, but much more active back then of course. Lots of sun shining in and plenty of people running around. Your Granddad had his parents living with us then and they were more sociable people than him if you can imagine. Always having people over so much we practically ran a bed and breakfast inn for a while there. Your mom liked to run around the house too and both her older brothers still lived with us then. Those three were always up to something or had a friend or two hanging out. Not to mention, your Granddad liked to host his buddies over regular for barbeques. And once a year, he'd invite all the men from his army unit over for the whole weekend. They'd all sit out on the back porch, drink beer and start telling them war stories. Sometimes they'd even act them out for the boys. Drove me crazy seeing a bunch of middle aged, drunk men crawling around in the dirt through

my good flowers and over my good shrubs. But they were mostly harmless and the boys loved it.”

“Wow. I can’t imagine. Mom and Dad always kept things quiet. They never had friends over, or family except you. Dad was an orphan so he didn’t have none. But Mom never spoke about her family or had any of them out to California.”

“Oh well, yes. She wasn’t but nine or ten when her brothers, Berle and Steven, died. And that can affect a person, you know.”

“Do you think that’s when Mom’s problems started?”

“Maybe. I don’t remember her being difficult then. Sad mostly. Always sitting by herself reading, or swinging in the swing. You see, your Grandad and I were married before the war and already had Berle and Steven. Your mom wasn’t born till many years later after your Grandad returned home from the war. So the boys were practically teenagers when she was a baby. Oh how they doted on her. And then she was barely a teenager herself when Berle and Steven went off to war. The Korean War this time. Only they didn’t return. Both died. It wrecked your Mom. Heck, it did your Granddad too. He felt a lot of guilt about that. Like he was responsible after all those war stories he and his buddies used to tell. He thought those stories encouraged Berle and Steven to go to war thinking it would be grand. Your Grandad felt he’d let them down by not giving an honest picture of how terrible war really is. Anyway, he never forgave himself and we just stopped talking about the boys after that.”

“How sad. I never knew any of that.”

“Worse part, I think your mother was most affected. Grandad went into a hole for a while and didn’t talk. Which really hurt your Mom cause she worshipped her Daddy. And her brothers. So when they died and he quit everything, she had a real hard time

of it. It wasn't much longer after that she met your father, married him, and took off for California."

"Is that when Mom's problems started?"

"You know, there were a few difficulties. Her running a little wild around town, drinking, back seats with boys, dropping out of school, coming home late. That sorta thing. I used to hear her talking to herself up in her room at night too even though we didn't have but one phone then and it being downstairs. But, God help me, I didn't want to invade her privacy. I was having enough problems with your Granddad and the loss of the boys myself. I wish I'd done more at the time."

After dinner, I helped Gran clean up the kitchen but was still reeling from her explanations. At the center of it, as much as I loved my mother, I worried she was not going to get better. And that I might become just like her. "Gran, do you think I'll end up like Mom? Talking to myself and all that when I turn sixteen?"

"No, Sugar. Now what makes you say that?" Gran asked.

"Dr. Singh, Mom's psychiatrist at the hospital, said mental illness is genetically passed down. That Mom probably got it from either you or Granddad. She gave me a pamphlet that said there's a sixty-six percent chance a person will inherit something if both parents are genetically predisposed, and thirty-three percent if only one parent has a mental illness."

"Ohh, them California doctors don't know everything, Sugar. That's all just conjecture as far as I'm concerned."

"She seemed awfully specific."

"Sugar, your Mom had some issues for sure. And they aren't all under her control. But that don't make her any different from anyone else. Them doctors can be helpful, sure.

But for the most part, they don't know much more than anyone about how these things happen."

"But what about her diagnosis. And her symptoms. And the medications the doctors prescribed for her to take. They help when she takes them. At least for a while."

"Sure, they seem to. It was your Dad who got her to take those meds. Before them though, she was quirky, sure, but not dangerous like after she started taking the medications. Those meds would slow her down and then changed her. I'm not sure there really was a problem with her before."

"Maybe, but I'm scared I might become just like Mom. Gran, can I tell you something and you promise not to tell Mom or Dr. Singh or anyone?"

"Sugar, you can tell me anything."

"No, please promise."

"I promise. I love you, Sugar."

"I hid all of Mom's medications. Right after Dad was buried and we had the funeral. She didn't stop taking them. I took them away and she just didn't realize cause she was upset over Dad and wasn't thinking clearly. I made her get sick again."

"Why, Sugar? Why would you do that?"

"I don't know. After Dad died, I was angry at her. And tired of having to care for her. It wasn't fair. She's my mother and I was all alone and she was supposed to be the one who took care of me. Not the other way around. I'm so sorry Gran. I just got so angry is all. I wanted her to get sick so they'd send her back to the hospital and then she and I could come live with you. But Mom went too far. I knew how dangerous she could get being off her pills, but I thought I could stop her in time. I just thought, if she went off for a while, she would want to come back here. I didn't know everything would get so screwed up. Oh Gran, I'm so sorry." I started crying.

“Oh, Sugar,” Gran said rushing over to hug me. To hold me. “It’s okay. Shh, it’s alright. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“But I did.”

“Suki, you’re still a little girl. I know you’re fifteen now, but you’ve had far too many burdens for a girl your age. And no one thinks straight after the death of someone in their family. I wished I’d known how hard a time you were having. I would’ve been more insistent about taking you and your Mom home with me. I feel like I let you down.”

“No Gran. It wasn’t you. You were the only thing that kept me going. But I don’t want to go back to California. Even if Mom gets better and is released from the hospital. I don’t want to live with her anymore.”

“I see.”

“I don’t hate her. She’s still my mom. But I don’t want to be there anymore. Can I stay here? With you? Even if Mom gets better?”

“Of course dear. Don’t worry yourself. I’ll put in a call to Ben Wade in the morning. He’s our town lawyer and can help us out. And you’re welcome to live here as long as you want. We’re family and this is your home. I don’t know what your mother will say or if she’ll try to demand you return. But we can talk with your mother as soon as she feels better. And no matter what, no matter what she says, I won’t let her or anyone take you away from here again. Not until you’re ready. I’ll get every person I’ve ever known and every person in a hundred square miles to fight for you and keep you safe!”

“You promise!”

“I do, Sugar. I want you here too. We’re in this together. And it’s about time we put a little more life back into this house.”

“Thank you, Gran. Really, thank you. That makes me feel better. I love you, Gran.”

“I love you too, Suki. Now how about we give Bethany and Jane a call and see if they want to meet us downtown for some ice cream. It’s Friday night and I’m all a sudden in the mood for some company.”

“Sounds good, Gran.”

The End.