

## A Little Halloween Story

By Bill Judge

--I--

Stepping into the woods, a woman turned once more to her daughters. With tears streaming down her face, she raised her hand – her fingers were slightly separated and one couldn't tell if she were signaling hello or goodbye. The tears themselves gave no clue if she were happy or sad for there was a tiny wan smile on her face. Her wrinkles had disappeared. She wore a pale cream cloak with a hood over her head. The hood draped down just above her green brown eyes. Her once grey hair was jet black again. She did say goodbye and then she walked away into the autumn woods.

As instructed, her grown daughters didn't follow. A light glowed through the trees. Not just around the trees but it seemed to glow through the trees themselves. It held for thirty seconds and then faded, and faded, and faded some more. And then she was gone. Her daughters waited and wondered if she would ever return.

--II--

Years later, a pale, luminous ball radiated in an alley between two forest green dumpsters. The globe slowly grew to engulf the pair of trash bins and the light held steady. A young girl of about ten lay between the dumpsters on the drive at the foot of one of the dirty brown brick buildings. Surrounded by crumpled newspapers and beat up cardboard, she stirred as if from a long nap and stretched. Grasping the handles on one of the bins, she stood up and stepped out from the cool light.

Once outside of the light, she shielded her eyes as if the shadows in the backstreet were suddenly too bright for her. As her eyes adjusted, she dropped her hands to her sides. She wore a grey robe, a long blue dress, and pink slippers with matching blue trim. There was no one in the alley. A din of unending, variant noise came from the opened end of the alley. She looked ahead and countless people passed forward and back. There were mechanical, harsh and blaring sounds from just beyond the people. Unsure of her surroundings and curious, she stepped forward, out of the alley and into the moving mass of humanity. The people pushed her along until she faced a set of stairs that led down underground. The steps were framed by steel and held a sign overhead. A part of the sign read, 'TO: Grand Central Station'. Not given much of a choice and not knowing where she should go anyway, she kept in step with the crowd and disappeared from the street above.

--III--

Taking a slip of paper, Berrie opened the side door that led to a drive that wrapped from the door to the front of the home all the way down to a country road high up in the hills.

An elderly man, older than Berrie, hoisted an overcoat over his shoulders and threaded his arms through the coat and picked up his fedora. "I've never been up here before. I used to see your mother in town on occasion but never been here. Wonderful lady. The Lady of the Woods, they called her. Is she here? But she couldn't be," he half mumbled. "Did she pass?" He asked in an undertone.

"She's been gone for years, now, doctor. Thank you. We do miss her," she answered. "I would have brought my sisters in to see you but I thought it best to call you first."

"No, no need to apologize. Like I said, it was on my way. I would have ended up waiting for you before I could leave." He added the hat to his head and looked around the spacious foyer that opened to the main hall. "It's just that I always heard that your home was so hard to find. Actually – *impossible* to find."

Berrie giggled, "Only when we want."

"Well, you know the talk in town," he started to say.

"Can be so much like the chirping birds," she finished his sentence.

"Exactly," he said with a large grin on his face. "It's enormous; it would be hard to miss."

"That's what I would think, too," she agreed with him. "But, you never know."

"I better get along now. You should get that filled as soon as you can. I know our little pharmacy in town is out of it right now, what with all the flu going around, but maybe in the next town, they'll have it available."

"We'll think of something." She backed away from the door.

"Are you sure you can find your way out?" she asked. "Do you remember how you got here?"

Dr. Johnson scratched the back of his head which made his hat dip down over his eyes. He flipped it back up with a finger a little too far and he had to resettle his hat. "Now that you mention it, there were some twists and turns, weren't there?"

"There are a few. I know you can't use Siri to find us," she said. "We do tend to blend in with the hills." She patted the side pockets of a smock which she wore over her dress when dusting and cleaning. "I've got something here for you, somewhere."

"What's that?" the doctor asked.

"Well, it was so nice of you to come out here that I wanted to give you a little gift." Bending down she dug into the pockets of her long, flowing skirt as her pearly grey hair caught a glint of sunlight. She pulled out an antique compass that was about the size and color of a Morgan silver dollar. "Now, if you ever do get lost up here, use this," she suggested. She held it out in front of her. "Just follow the arrow. It knows where you want to go."

"How quaint," he remarked.

"If you do get lost."

"Oh, that was just idle town talk about your house," he interrupted her as he straightened out his hat. He picked up his medical bag from a nearby chair. "I think I can find my way."

"Probably," she said. "But just in case, it would do my heart good to know you had this. Remember, follow the arrow. Wherever you want to go."

Thanking her, he took it and said good bye.

--IV--

Twenty minutes later, Berrie tiptoed from behind a very large bedroom door and stepped into an upper hall.

"Don't go into the city, Berrie, we'll be okay," Bernie called from the room.

Berrie rolled her eyes. "Hush, now, the doctor came all the way over here and wrote the prescription. It only makes sense that one of us should go and get it," she replied as she gently pulled her sister's door closed, but still leaving just the slightest crack. She could hear a muffled hack from within.

"But why you?" came the question as soon as the coughing ceased.

"Because I'm not sick," Berrie clicked her tongue with the answer.

"But you'll probably get it, too," Bernie wheezed, "and maybe worse."

"Probably is not for sure," Berrie whispered to herself with her back to the door. "And he didn't say I would get it for sure, either."

"I can hear you perfectly well," Bernie said.

"I figured, Miss Bernice," Berrie smiled. Even though Bernie's bed was several strides from the door, across a thick Persian carpet, she was not surprised. "It's why I didn't raise my voice. Now you just pull the quilt up to your chin and be quiet. Let the peppermint oil do its work." She paused and continued, "And drink all of the echinacea tea that I made for you. I hope I didn't go to all of that trouble for nothing."

"Listen to the youngest tell the oldest what to do."

"Listen to the oldest be the bossiest," Berrie mumbled as quietly as a mouse.

"Heard that, too!"

"I'll bet you did. You were the one that wanted the ears of a bat."

"Well, you told mama that you wanted a heart of gold only because you thought it would make you rich!"

Berrie chuckled. She knew her sister was half right. They were very young when their mother had asked them the curious question so many years ago. If you could take something from nature and make it a part of you, what would you take? They were helping their mother gather herbs and mushrooms, centipedes and salamanders, little tree frogs and spider webs in the woods that ringed their home when she had asked.

Neither of the triplets thought much about the question other than it was another of their mother's games. Like the rhymes she had them memorize. Rhymes that helped them find things for the people in the village. Like a horse that had run off. Or a child's cat. Or a family heirloom. Rhymes that helped chase the rain away. Or rhymes that brought the rain to thirsty fields or sunshine to flowers. Rhymes that brought true love or helped discern true love - which was just as important. They had thousands and thousands of rhymes. They had learned many of them as their mother sung in a soft little voice as they helped her, just like that day in the woods, years and years ago.

'Watch the birds as they fluff their feathers; they're the first to know a change in weather.' Sometimes they were silly little rhymes like that.

They never knew what kind of trouble the town's people would bring to their door but they would have a rhyme stored away somewhere that would help whisk their worries away. The rhymes would be either in their memories or in the books that their mother left them when she had passed away. The more common rhymes were found in the books they kept in the library on the main floor of their very old ancestral home. Rivahurst Manor, their mother called it. The home in the woods above the river.

Now, as an aside, one could call their home's architectural style Victorian because it certainly had characteristics of that age, but it was more ancient than that. Its foundation was part of the bone and marrow of the Yankee granite that had formed millions of years ago. It reached deep into the earth. Down, down into the ages and it drew life up from the millennia that had long ago passed from the surface. The structure stood above the Hudson, above the road where Ichabod Crane had ridden his horse and where he had tried to escape the Headless Horseman. Where ghost stories were as common as the oaks and pines and cold running streams that covered the hills and valleys. Where mists rose on dark, chilly November nights and clouds covered the moon and stars, and some of the town's people below the towering home remembered a rhyme or two that their own mothers had learned from the lady in the woods on the hill.

'When the night is ripe for a ghost's delight; it's best to stay by the fire's light.'

But the older, more arcane rhymes could be found scattered in books around the house such as, in the alcoves of the steeples, nestled in dusty bookcases. Sometimes they had to use a rhyme to find a book that held the rhyme that they wanted. But their mother had prepared them for that, too.

You can't know everything, she said, but you will always have each other and one of you will remember what you need and that will be enough. And through the years, it was enough.

"She's right, you know," the middle sister, Bertie, said from across the hall. "You'll get sick too."

"She isn't right and you know it," Berrie shushed her as she entered Bertie's room and added a few drops of peppermint oil to a diffuser. "Same medicine for you." Berrie pulled the midnight blue quilt up to Bertie's nose and then folded it back. "Be a dear and get some rest," Berrie patted her hand. She walked over to one of the two large bedroom windows and tugged the cream Holland roller blinds so they would close. She pulled a layer of lace coverings together, followed by a pair of chintz curtains that had been puddled on the floor. The entire top third of the window had already been covered by a heavy drapery. Everything about the room was Victorian. The window seats and window treatments were from that age, as were the paintings and sculptures - one of which was a trio of fairies clasping their right hands together above their heads while they danced and, with the other hand, they held their skirts out to the side. A working Victrola was backed against a wall. The recordings stacked neatly in a two-toned mahogany cabinet underneath. Bertie's heavy, dark closet doors had carvings of woodland animals and trees and flowers. A half-finished pencil drawing lay upon a table and the charcoals, both

thick and thin, lay next to it. Berrie glanced at the sketch and admired her sister's ability to draw before she closed the drapes on the other window.

"There," she said with her hands on her hips, "it's dark enough to get some rest. Shall I light your lamp before you sleep?" She looked back to where her sister, Bertie, lay under a canopied bed. Bertie sneezed and then coughed with a chest rumble.

"Heaven knows where you two picked up those germs." Berrie struck a long match, lifted an oil burning lamp with the other hand, and guided the flame through the pear shaped frosted globe until the match caught the wick on fire. She blew out the match and set the lamp on the nightstand next to Bertie's bed.

"It's coming for you, too," Bertie said with the covers puffed up around her face.

"You never really know, do you?" Berrie replied as she gazed with love at her sister.

Bertie had said to their mother that long ago day that she wanted to be as beautiful as a daisy and she was, even as they were now in their early hundreds. The years had scarcely touched her face.

"Sometimes I do," she stated in staccato.

"You do, don't you?" Berrie agreed though she knew that their mother had given her the gift of foresight and not her sisters and especially not her sister Bertie. Their mother had spread the gifts among them fairly equally though she did seem to favor her youngest with the more 'serious' of the benefactions. Whereas Bertie was beautiful as well as a musician, a painter and a sculptor, and Bernie could hear like a bat, see like a hawk, work like a horse and could have played sports as a pro, Berrie had charity of heart, the wisdom of an owl, and the ability to strike justice as quickly as a bolt of lightning. And, sometimes, not always, but sometimes, she could feel the future. She wished she could see the future clearly but all she had were forebodings.

She felt the future that morning but she didn't tell her sisters. She didn't want to worry them unnecessarily. Something was going to happen but she couldn't tell what and, if she couldn't tell what, she couldn't tell her sick sisters.

If she said anything, her 'oldest' sister, by just tens of minutes, would tell her to stay home and they would all go to New York City together when they got well. Which, of course, was nonsensical fiddle faddle since there was no telling if they would get well without the medicine. The ancient cures were alright when they worked and they did work most of the time. But when the time honored cures didn't work they needed to turn to modern medicine, such as antibiotics. It made sense to be practical. Practicality was a nice tool to add to the toolbox. Berrie was sure their mother had a rhyme along those lines.

And if Bernie got her way, Bertyl, the next older sister by just a few minutes, would use the excuse in a heartbeat just to soak in all of the excitement of a train ride and play for a day in the city. Bertie was like that. She was all in for anything that could promise fun even if she were standing next to the Spectre of Death himself. Most everybody had the good sense to avoid him. Not Bertie. Bertie would flirt with Death until she had her dance.

Berrie was pretty sure whatever cold or illness they had could be the beginning of something much worse. So she was willing to go alone into the city. None of them had ever gone by themselves into New York City. They always traveled together. They always did everything together and maybe that's why she felt a dark cloud slipping over her. Maybe, she told herself, it was nothing more than the prospect of being away from her sisters for the first time in her life.

--V--

"Are you sure you won't wait, Berrie, until we're better?" Bernie asked.

"We will be as good as new tomorrow," Bertie said, and then followed with, "Achoooooo!"

They all had gotten out of bed again, of course, and were standing in the parlor, off to the side of the front door foyer, dressed in their slippers and robes. Berrie had a dark grey coverall cloak with a floppy hood that lay on the top of her back, a big shopping bag and her purse were carried over her right arm,

her car keys in her left hand, and a little wand was in her right hand. She wore a short black triangular hat with the long point drooped backward.

"No, you won't," Berrie answered. "I have a feeling about this. I'll just take the train like we always do, down to Central Station. And then I'll take the subway to the Village and fill our needs at our favorite apothecary. He'll have everything ready."

"Of course, he will," Bernie said.

"We're running low on dried bat wings."

"I know, dear. I called ahead with our list. Gryff will have it all, including the antibiotic."

"Black widow moltings?"

"All of it," Berrie nodded.

"Eye of newt?" Bertie asked.

"Now you are just being silly," Berrie replied.

"I guess I was. But did you bring some stardust with you?"

"Why would I ever?"

"In case you need to disappear."

"In New York City?"

"Of course."

"I thought everybody was invisible in New York City, unless you're a star," Berrie quipped. "Besides, you've always been better at that sort of thing."

Bertie giggled and then coughed because she giggled. "Always came in handy when we played hide and seek." She coughed again. "But it can work for you too. It will, at least, help you to blend in with all of the others. You never know when that could be handy," she added with some importance as she held out a little bag. "Put this in your pocket."

"I guess you're right." Berrie took the bag.

"And here's a charcoal pencil just in case you need to smudge things."

"Smudge things?" Berrie raised an eyebrow.

"Hide your identity."

"Why would I do that?"

"You think you are the only one who knows things, Berrie." Bertie had said it with such gravity that Berrie just took the piece of charcoal and put it in her purse.

"How would I use it?"

"Rub a little on your fingertips and face. Brush it off on your cloak."

"Why would I do that?"

"Just do it, Berrie, if you think you need it."

"I don't understand."

"I know." Bertie gave her a little hug.

Her oldest sister watched the interactions and waited until they had finished and then asked. "Is the car gassed?"

"Of course."

"Well, then, I guess you are ready."

"I am. Good bye my loves." They formed a group. They were three of the littlest old ladies in the Hudson Valley region. Berrie hugged and kissed them on the cheek. She waved again as she walked down the front steps, across the grass and got into their modified 1960 Silver Arrow black Rolls Royce.

The entire interior of the car had been redone to accommodate their diminutive height, including the pedals and plush seating. She turned the key, started the engine and drove off with another brave wave of the hand. She looked back at the open door, at her two sisters, at the long porch that nestled into the two peaks that towered a couple of stories above the four storied home. As soon as she turned the

corner at the bottom of the hill at the bottom of their property and was sure she was well hidden by the trees, she cried. She missed her home. And she especially missed her two dear sisters even more.

--VI--

She boarded the commuter train in the town beyond their own home town and found a comfortable seat next to a window. With a little sing song rhyme, she fashioned her hat into a huggable plush seat and she settled back and relaxed. She was the stereotypical, amiable sort of old lady on a shopping holiday with her purse looped through her arm and held tightly next to her body as she peered out the window. Her large, canvas shopping bag was draped over her knees and held loosely by her left hand. She still wore her coat and had pulled her hood up a little bit above her head. Not enough to hide her face from any passengers that sat directly next to her but enough to give her some privacy from those behind her. Her eyes sparkled, either from the tears or from the excitement. Unlike the others who had boarded and filled the train on each subsequent stop, she was in no hurry. They were on their way to work. A youngish man took the seat next to her. For some of the commuters, the job was probably enjoyable and something to look forward to. For others, she could tell, their job was a source of tension. The man next to her was developing an ulcer. His shoulder rocked into her again. No, there was no doubt about it. The train's bumpy ride kept pushing him into her so there was body contact and she could sense his ailments. An ulcer and high blood pressure. An unreasonable boss. Unreasonable demands. He rubbed his stomach. The poor man. His job was definitely causing some health issues. The train lurched again and he fell into her, unable to stop himself.

"I'm so sorry," he said. He had a pinch between his eyes. Brown eyes. Round nose. Nice ears. A few greys sprinkled in a curly short Afro. He would have had a friendly face if he weren't so tense. "Quite alright." She touched his forearm and left her hand there to pick up some more of his thoughts. Married. His wife just had a baby. She hadn't gone back to work and really didn't want to go back. Another jostle. Another touch. He had to make a decision about advertising but he wasn't sure which campaign to select. All of the terms were so confusing. He was new to online. It was different than radio and print. The younger guys understood it. If he could just figure out the new terms and jargon. He used to make his sales, he especially loved radio, but he had been slipping as his company used more online advertising. It was so frustrating and his boss was no help and he was not letting up. All of the online campaigns seemed to promise the world but deep down, he knew better. Only one would actually deliver what he needed but he didn't know how to choose it among the pretenders. His head was so mixed up; he couldn't even get a gut reaction. And then there was his wife. He wanted to provide for her and the baby.

Rolling into the edges of downtown New York City, the man began to slide towards the center aisle. Berrie touched him again. This time with her left hand. She also touched him with the tip of the wand in her right. "Think about the funny one. It has reach and a good click through rate." She said the words even though she wasn't sure what they meant. But she was absolutely sure they were the right words. Her eyes narrowed as she stared straight into his eyes. Gaping at him, she felt the raw edges of his worries, his anxieties and his hopes - at least the ones for his job and the concerns for his wife. "You're kidding me." He grabbed his brief case. "How could you possibly know?" She lightened up and relaxed her gaze. "People always like the funny ones, don't they?" Her green eyes sparkled with little flecks of silver.

He batted his eyes a couple of times, processed what she said, and then smiled as he inched up the aisle, "I guess they do." He took another step forward. "I know I do." Then the aisle full of people began to move up like a herd of sheep and he made it to the door. He turned to her and mouthed the words, "Thank you," and then departed.

Satisfied, Berrie settled in as another man sat down next to her without so much as a little glance. Even as he bumped her, he didn't acknowledge her. Feeling a bit of heaviness in her chest, she blinked, cocked her head, and then leaned back in her comfy seat with the wisp of a smirk. Each to his own, she

thought. Even without her extra senses, she knew he was way too full of himself for her to help him in any way. A prickly pear, she harrumphed and looked about at the crowd of people and the scenery outside the train. They passed down into the tunnels and made several stops with people getting on and off. Her exit was just ahead. Her chest rumbled with a cough as the train came to a stop in Grand Central Station. She hoped Bertie wasn't right about the flu.

Sliding over, her legs felt like cement as she followed the people out of the commuter train to the Uptown line six and miraculously found a seat. She coughed again. Normally she would have loved people watching in New York City and especially in Greenwich Village. But she wrapped her coat around her and hacked for the eight minutes to Greenwich. Disembarking, she dragged herself up to the surface using the hand rail as both a way to steady herself and as a life line. Once up on Lafayette, she tried to get her bearings despite all of the people.

Like the old Hoagy Carmichael song said, there were doctors, lawyers and native American chiefs. Broadway show dancers practiced their steps and carried their dresses on their way to rehearsals. They dodged in and out of the crowds of people on the sidewalks. City engineers, bankers, financial planners, and middle managers gripped their laptops and briefcases on their way to meetings and white collared priests and social workers hurried to their parishes and work centers. More Broadway and off-Broadway actors, actresses, and stagehands made their way to the show district.

Using her wand as a sort of diviner stick, she picked her way through the crowd without incident. The rush of humanity seemed to part before her and then bash again behind her like a huge wave on a rocky beach.

But her destination, Gryffen's Apothecary and Emporium, probably drew the most eclectic clientele of all. She passed the store's high glass windows outside. People seeking information on arcane spells and charms, or stories about healings, could find hundreds of books in Gryff's shop. Old earth master Gryff's three story market, library and research center carried crystals, maps, dried roots, crushed and dried iguana, chameleon, bat wings, spiders, and many other arachnids and insects, reptiles, amphibians, mythical beasts, powders, chemicals, fluids, mixtures and, yes, apothecary blends known only to him. Keeping up with more modern medicine, he also stocked a pharmacy. And of course, to keep things interesting for everybody, including himself, he had a 1930 Indian Chief Scout sitting on the main floor, ready to ride, autographed photos of the presidents, including Dwight Eisenhower, FDR, Harry Truman, John F Kennedy and Teddy Roosevelt. A very life like mannequin, dressed in a buckskin plainsman coat and leggings, clutched a flint musket. Another section of the store was dedicated to the Hollywood icons of the thirties, forties and fifties - Clark Cable, Carole Lombard, Cary Grant, Jean Arthur, Irene Dunne, James Stewart, the swashbuckler Errol Flynn and the most glamorous of all, Marilyn Monroe. Cartoon characters from Mickey Mouse to the Teen Titans were represented by posters, figurines and full size figures. Most of them were concentrated in the children's corner which had been established in order to entertain the kids and give the adults a chance to shop.

Still feeling poorly, Berrie entered the store, walked down an aisle and immediately looked for a place to sit. A large Kodiak bear stood against the wall near the pharmacy and was flanked by two wooden chairs. Berrie hurried over and sat down in one and caught her breath. She waited with her purse resting on her lap. An owl flew over from the banister railings on the second floor onto the top of the bear's head. Berrie glanced up and said, "Hello Sophie, could you do me a favor? Could you please let Gryff know I'm here," and the owl bowed its head and flew off to another corner of the store. Berrie coughed viciously.

"Oh my, what a cough. Excuse me, but Gryffen already knows you're here, my dear," a short, chubby, older man of indeterminate age declared. He stood to her side. Wearing a grey broad striped seersucker waistcoat, he was dressed in black slacks and a white lab coat, with a pair of square reading glasses on the end of a bulbous nose. A watch chain hung from his waistcoat pocket. His frilly sideburns covered the front edge of his triangular pointy ears. Carrying a ledger of some sort, he had a pencil stuck over an

ear and through his thick grey hair. "I have your order ready but you sound terrible. You didn't mention that you were sick, too."

"I wasn't, Gryff." Using the arms of the chair, she stood. "I'm not."

He tilted his head and looked up at her through his glasses. All of a sudden his eyes looked ten times bigger. "You're NOT?" He stepped back. "You could have fooled me." He stuck out his finger and the owl landed on his hand. He whispered something to it and the owl flew off.

"Just like Sophie fooled you by being a girl?" Berrie asked, the timbre in her voice rose up on the musical scale. Her eyes danced.

"I always knew Sophocles was a girl. I just liked the name," he snipped.

"I'm sure." Berrie coughed again. And coughed. And coughed and had to sit again.

"Well. I've sent *Sophie* off for a friend of mine. If you have what I suspect you have, your doctor only prescribed enough for your sisters." He made a note on his ledger with his short, stubby fingers. "Odd that you, your sisters and my Merimoné are all sick at the same time," he said, as he continued to write. "You don't have little blue bumps, do you?" He examined her with his big eyes peering through his glasses.

"No," she blushed.

"Well, good." His glasses slid back down to the end of his nose. "My Me-oh-may does. Strangest thing. Dry, rashy, bumpy things. Not sure what it is. We may need some outside help if it continues. If we can find help of that sort."

"Oh, dear." The dark feeling stayed with her.

"Never mind. You rest here and I'll get your bag."

Watching the shoppers, Berrie felt sorry for the children. While Gryff had engravings of monkeys and songbirds and seals with balls that ran up the tree-like pillars that supported the triple stories of his emporium, they were only etchings and carvings. They could scarcely occupy the children's attention for long. And, looking above, hung from netting, were some delightful, miniature pterodactyls and archaeopteryxs, as well as models of the first man made airplanes, helicopters and space capsules. They teased the kids and the kids responded by tugging on their parents.

"Please, mom, can I get that?" Pointing up, a boy pulled on his mom's sleeve as she dug through some patterns looking for the perfect gift - which took time and attention.

"Not now, just minute," his mother tried to placate him without looking away from the patterns. "We'll get a treat soon."

"Not a treat, mom. That!" The boy pointed to a pteranodon. A gust of air made its wings flap as if it were really flying.

"Do you mind, Berrie, I know you're not feeling well," Gryff had returned. "Me-oh-may would entertain the kids on a Saturday like this while I ran the store." He carried a turn of the century cloth paisley traveling bag filled with the supplies requested by Berrie and her sisters. "Just a little twist of the wrist, so to speak. You don't even need to get up."

"Of course."

"Just like this." He held his hand out with his finger and traced a couple of quick circles in the direction of the corner of the store. He looked like a music maestro.

"You really are to beat the band, Gryff." Berrie took out her wand and mimicked the movements. Suddenly, yellow finches, mockingbirds and warblers twittered across the room, a pterodactyl swooped over the maps and headed for the corner. A model T Ford scooted between several feet. A hook and ladder fire truck followed. None of the adults seemed to notice but the kids squealed and let go of their parents and followed the vehicles. A couple of squirrels with acorns in their mouths climbed down a life like oak tree trunk and scurried down the aisles. Children began to laugh as they followed the planes and birds and animals to the corner of the store. Two massive black and bronze, furry Tibetan mastiffs, also brought to life with Berrie's wand, watched over them as they delighted in the antics. They were

perfectly safe and perfectly entertained. Somehow, stars and planets twinkled above them. DeBussy's Clair de Lune played in the background. Their eyes were wide, and their mouths open and heads turned everywhere at once to watch everything. A blue and red sparkling bottle rocket flew in an arc and extinguished itself in a jar of white sand. The kids clapped.

"It won't last all day. Just the afternoon," Berrie said as she stuck her wand in her purse.

"That's fine, Berrie, that's fine. Thank you. It's best that the extraordinary not become ordinary."

One of the mothers called for her child and he came running towards her.

"Did you see the dinosaur, Mom?"

"Of course, I did."

"It flew, didn't it?"

"Of course, it did."

"Can we take it home?"

The mother paused. "Maybe for Christmas." She saw Gryffen standing near Berrie. "Will you have the dinosaurs for sale over the holidays?"

"I don't know," Gryff began to answer.

"Will they really fly?" The boy asked.

"I don't think so, Johnny," the mother answered for Gryff, to his great relief. "Come on, we need to do some more shopping," his mother finished. "Thank you very much," she said to Gryffen.

"Have a nice day and thank you." He bowed and turned away from her while the little boy jabbered all of the way out of the store. "Whew," Gryff mopped his head with a handkerchief. "That's the down side of the Saturday afternoon entertainment." He straightened his waistcoat. "Me-oh-may doesn't want the parents to see the little show." He tugged on the sleeves of his lab coat.

"Would you have it any other way?" Berrie asked.

"No. The place would be a mad house. Overrun by barbarians." Customers filled the aisles, digging through packages. "As if it isn't already."

Just then, a beautiful young lady with shoulder length curly red hair and freckles approached. Sophie flew up right behind her.

"Here we go." Gryff said. "Berrie, meet Annie. She'll look you over, if you don't mind."

Berrie had a question in her eyes.

"She takes care of Merimoné so she knows a little about you."

"Ahhh, okay," Berrie said. "If you insist."

"It's probably best."

"Only if you want, Miss Berrie," Annie said.

"It's okay. It might be the only way I can get out of this store."

"I'm hurt," Gryff put a hand on his chest.

"If dwarves had hearts, I'd believe you," Berrie snickered and coughed.

"Now, I'm really hurt."

"I'm just teasing."

Gryff gave a smile of sorts and escorted them both to a back room and left. Twenty minutes later, Annie helped Berrie to the chair by the Kodiak bear.

"Remember what I said," Annie reminded her. "I need to go. There are a couple of more patients I need to see, but I'll find Gryffen first. Don't you worry," she added with a look of worry on her face. She turned and left.

Berrie noted the irony between the words and the look and knew the feeling she had in her own heart. Something was wrong but nobody knew what.

Gryff returned with another brown glass bottle and stuck it in the travel bag.

"Just as I thought. But you didn't want to listen to me."

"Oh Gryff, it's not that."

"If it's not that, then, what is it?"

"Now that I'm here, I can't be sick."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

She thought about it and then did chuckle. "Maybe it is, but if you heard my sisters at home, you might think differently." She tried to clear her chest.

"Of course it is." He pulled the other chair over. "Speaking of home, how are you going to get there?"

Berrie didn't expect his question and had to think quickly. She knew he wouldn't approve of the train.

"I'm going to fly."

He stared at her. "Are you?"

"Yes."

"Are you really?"

"Why, yes." At first, she didn't think he would believe her but then she realized that he didn't know she couldn't fly like Bertie could fly after she sprinkled herself with the stardust. Gryff wasn't one of them, an *arestar*. He was only married to Merimoné and she didn't know everything. Merimoné knew about Bertie so she may have just assumed the same about her.

But even Bertie couldn't fly from New York City to their home although Gryff wouldn't know that either. When Bertie dusted herself, she could disappear and fly from the ground to the upper branches of a tree, or from the front lawn to the roof of their house. And it was possible that she could fly for the length of a city block, Berrie wasn't sure about the exact distance. She could fly and it was a great advantage but she wasn't Supergirl. Still, she was very hard to catch when they were little girls.

"Do you need some extra stardust?" He asked in a hushed tone. "I have some, you know. Not very much. Just a thimble full, but you can have it." He hunched over so no one could hear. "It's very old, but I am sure it's good. Stars are very old, too, you know," he added with a great seriousness.

"You are a dear, sweet man, Gryff. I'm sure it's good. But I have plenty. I'll make it home." Coughing, she managed to say, "But I will take my first dose of the medicine."

"Of course, of course, let me help you. I'll fix it for you."

Grabbing the brown bottle from the bag, he stepped behind a counter and mixed up a little glass.

Holding it out for her, she noticed that it was layered in pink and blue.

"Will we be able to do that?"

"The layers?"

"Yes."

"Of course, what do you take me for, a common pharmacist?" He giggled. "The blue liquid is supposed to prevent, or combat, the caeruleus dermatitis. But I don't think it's working on Me-oh-may."

"What's that? Caeruleus dermatitis."

"Blue bumpy, flaky skin. The blue bumps."

"Is it serious?"

"I don't know. I've never seen anything like it."

"But there's a name for it."

"There's *my* name for it. I'm still researching. I don't know if the drug I gave you will do any good for the bumps. But it will help with the flu symptoms."

"All we can do is try. Down the hatch." Berrie tossed it back and stood up and beamed. "Well there now. I feel better already."

"It doesn't work like that." Gryff's face was dead serious.

She smiled. "I tried."

He blinked. "You can't fool a dwarf so easily."

"So I see. Poor Merimoné," she mugged, knowing full well how easily Merimoné could fool him. It was fun. "Well, I better go." She got a hand on the two bags.

Before she could go, Gryff spoke up. "Soooo, I want to ask. Where do you go to, uh, take off?" He played with his ledger while he asked.

"You mean, where do I hide to fly?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

Although her head was swimming, she smirked. "I guess I go to an alley, somewhere. Just like the movies."

"Really?" He stared through his glasses with wide open eyes.

"Sometimes." Berrie figured it was best not to explain, so she picked up the bags. "Thank you so very much, Gryff. Give our love to Merimoné." She touched his arm and had a flash of insight. Dwarves could be such funny creatures. So serious and yet child like. She could tell that he was definitely fascinated by flying. Maybe because dwarves were so earth bound. And Gryff was such a kind hearted dwarf. No wonder Merimoné fell in love.

"Ohhhhhh! Gross!!" The door was pushed open and a woman screamed. An ugly, heavy, long whiskered rat stuck his nose around the door jamb, sniffed and peeked inside. A greenish mist rose up behind the rodent and crept over him and through the door. It smelled as foul as a rotting corpse. Berrie whipped her wand from her purse and zapped him with a quick flick of electric on his pink, fleshy honker. The rat's eyes bulged, the tip of his nose sizzled and smoked, and he scurried away with a cry. She jiggled her wand several times and brushed the stench back into the sewers beneath the street.

"There now. Be gone for good," she said with her nose turned up. She heard a shuffle of feet behind her.

"The charm must be weakening," Gryff exclaimed to Berrie as he hurried up to the front of the store and stood next to her.

"What do you mean?"

"The rats. Merimoné sprinkled some kind of dust that was bound with a charm. It was supposed to scare the rats away." He stepped outside for a few moments and then came back in. "Yes, it's gone. All gone."

"What's gone?"

"The dust. The sand. I don't know. It glittered. She scattered it around the store and somehow it kept the rats from coming inside."

"The rats were here before?"

"Oh yes. About a month ago. At least a dozen of them. Nasty things. So persistent. And they were always coming back."

"I doubt if that one will be back," she said with a smug smile.

"Maybe not, but his brothers will."

"Not while I'm here," she said bravely and tapped her wand on her open hand.

Gryff looked at her with hope in his eyes.

She changed the subject. "What exactly was it? The sand that Merimoné used."

"Little star like bits of crystal and shiny bright metal. I don't know, really. She didn't say. A lot like sand but not really sand."

Berrie nodded and continued, "Do you know the words she used?"

"No, I wasn't paying attention. We had customers at the time. Something about unwelcome beasts, the sun in the east, the dark of night, the dawn's first light. There were more words."

"Yes, yes. It sounds like she was naming your enemies and defining an all day and all night protection."

Her brow furrowed as she thought. "Why would they come here?" she asked. "Are they a nuisance to all the stores down here?"

"No, I don't think so," Gryff shook his head. "None of the other stores are having problems. I think those rats are somehow connected to the mayor."

"Why? The mayor? You're not making any sense."

"The mayor is the biggest rat of all."

She raised her brows.

“Do you know anything about city politics? About ‘pay to play?’”

Her face was blank.

“Of course not. Kickbacks? The protection racket?”

Berrie’s eyes went side to side. “I’m afraid not.”

“You don’t know much about the city, do you? Living high up on the hill for all of these years.”

“I guess not.” She didn’t particularly care for his choice of words but she listened.

“Well, down here, in the mess we call city life,” he drew himself up to every inch of his five foot frame, “we have to make the best of the hand we’re dealt and yet, live with ourselves. You follow me?” His big eyes bugged through his glasses.

She found a wooden box standing on its end and leaned her back end on it.

“All of the thieving and favoritism. All of the cheating. I finally had enough of the mayor and his stealing ways and I said no. NO!” He pounded his fist into his other hand.

She stared at the hands and wondered what in the world he was talking about.

“So, when he upped the monthly rate another hunnert, I said, no, Merimoné, NO! We ain’t gonna do it! And we didn’t.” He slapped his thigh. “You got it?”

She didn’t but she nodded.

He snorted, and then, snorted again. The shoppers milled all around them and didn’t notice the animated little man. He stared at her, cocked his head, and peered through the glasses. “You don’t understand a single thing I’m saying, do you?”

With her lips pursed and then unpursed, she said, “I’m afraid not, Gryff.”

“Whew,” he blew out a breath. “Let me break this down into the basics so even someone from the hills can understand.”

Luckily for him, she didn’t take offense at all of the knocks about living in the hills. At least, not really. He puffed up his cheeks, blew out some air, sucked in some more, and then began. “The mayor is running for re-election. You know that, don’t you?” He didn’t stop long enough for her to answer. “He needs money and he needs votes. He figures the easiest way to get the money and get the votes is to lean on people. Make them pay and let them know that, if they don’t vote the way they should vote, things will only get worse. So, he asks for a hunnert more a month to what he calls The Friends of the Mayor Fund or he sends some trouble to your place if you don’t. Now do you follow?”

“A little.”

“Well, me and Mr. Li didn’t pay and we won’t pay. See?”

She nodded. She wondered who Mr. Li was but she didn’t want to interrupt.

“Except Mr. Li is out of business. No more restaurant.”

She got her answer. Mr. Li ran a restaurant.

“And why do you think?” He crossed his arms.

“He didn’t pay the mayor.”

“You’re catching on.” His head bobbed up and down. “Nobody wants to eat at a restaurant that’s crawling with rats. And that’s what happened to him. He didn’t have a Merimoné to keep the rats out.”

“Oh, the mayor sent the rats?” She said it but said it as a question.

“Yes,” Gryff said as his head went up and down in slow motion.

“But people don’t have the ability to control rats like that.”

Gryff’s head continued to go up and down and he smiled. “You’re catching on.”

“So, either he’s not really human or there’s a wicked influence about.”

His head was still bobbing, “Yes. That would be my guess and why Merimoné has the blue bumps.” He looked triumphant, as if he finally explained the entire mystery.

Berrie put her hands down as if she was going to stand but she remained sitting. “That’s quite a stretch, Gryff, even for an excitable dwarf like you.” She merely returned the ‘hills’ insult. “I can’t think of any

*arestars* that have gone to evil. It's not in our make-up. Besides we don't have much interest in common human affairs."

"Oh, I am not making any of this up."

"Rats can be rats. From what I understand, they're all over down here." She playfully returned another insult just in case he missed the first.

"It's not as bad as you think, down here in the city." He didn't miss it.

"But you're telling me it is." She began to toy with him like Merimoné would.

"I'm trying to explain to you why I think the mayor is a big rat."

"The mayor is really a rat? He's not a human? Now, you really got problems." The beginnings of a smile crossed her face.

He saw the smile. "Nooo! He's a human. He's human, alright." His face turned red. "I mean, he's crooked. No good. And he sent the rats."

"Were they like that rat?" She pointed to the door. "Or were they bigger rats with two legs?"

"Oh my goodness, Berrie, aren't you listening to me? They were humongous rats. And they tormented only me and Mr. Li. And now, just me."

"It's hard to believe."

"Merimoné believed me. And she provided the hedge of protection. And then she got sick and got the blue bumps."

"Well, maybe." Berrie could still feel the remnants of Merimoné's spell even though it had pretty much disappeared. She continued, "Maybe she did it because she is married to you and just wanted to please you."

"No, that's not it."

"What's not it? She's not married to you? Or she doesn't want to please you?"

"Oh, never mind. You're impossible, Berrie." He sighed.

"Okay," Berrie relented, "Maybe she helped you because you oppose this re-election thing."

"Yes."

"And you say he has friends in high places." She bent over to him. "Do you know what kind of friend?"

"No. But, if it's not him, he has the kind of friend that can send rats to whatever place he wants whenever he wants."

"It's not him."

"How do you know?"

"I've seen pictures," she said crisply.

"You can tell just from pictures?"

"I can tell that he's a miserable, overbearing, condescending, arrogant, middle aged man who loves to lord it over people."

"You hit the nail on the head with that."

"It wasn't hard."

He waited a moment and said, "I still have a rat problem."

"Not anymore."

"You only ran off the one. There will be more. Maybe dozens more."

"Sent by the mayor."

"Yes. And, if he can send rats, who knows what else he can do."

"Hmmm." She obviously wasn't sure about that. She straightened up. "Why don't you pay? You've got the money."

"I've also got my principles."

"But you must have paid something before."

"I don't want to talk about that. I am not paying. That's all there is to it."

"Dwarves and their love of money," she said, but she bit her bottom lip and considered what she had heard. She rubbed her hands together and then said, "I can't say I know much about politics but it does sound like extortion. I can't stand dishonesty."

"Extortion. Right. That's the word. Extortion. Pay to play. And I'm not paying."

"You say Merimoné was able to keep the rats out?"

"They never made their way in, so, yes, she kept them out."

"With the sand and spell."

"Yes."

"Now that they've broken through, they'll be back again."

"I know. I know. I wish Merimoné was well. She would fight them." His eyes narrowed as he looked at her.

"Can you set some traps?"

"I did that at first but I don't think these are normal rats."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll have to show you. Just wait here." He hurried off to a back room and returned with a burlap potato sack bulging at the sides. "Look at this." He held up a broken rat trap. A corner of the trap was bent upward. He set it down. "And this." The heavy gauge band of the trap was bent in the middle as if it had hit a rat in the neck but left a U-shaped bend. "Can you believe it?" He handed it to her.

"Ugghhh," she grunted and immediately set it down and rubbed her fingers. "Disgusting."

"They had to be monster rats to do that to the traps. I've got more. Plenty more. But you'll like this one." He pushed around in the bag and pulled out another. The trap had been sprung and a little doll like dwarf was pinned by the throat by the steel band. "How can a rat do that? A rat can't do that! At least, I don't think a rat can." He went from disbelief, to rejection, to partial acceptance, all in a couple of seconds. His face was red. "Look, I know you don't feel well but can you do something about it? Merimoné would, but she can't. Please." He held his hands out like a beggar.

Shocked by the little doll, Berrie's eyes and mouth flew open. Her first reaction was to back away. "I don't know. I don't know the mayor. I don't know the circumstances. I'm not involved." Berrie replied. "I really don't feel good." As if on cue, she coughed with a deep rumble in her upper body.

His face softened. "You don't know the circumstances? It's me, Berrie. Me and Merimoné and we're in trouble. And you are involved, whether you like it or not."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"You zapped that rat, didn't you? You practically fried his nose right off his ugly twitchy little face. I don't blame you. I wish I could have hit him with this paddle." He reached up and touched the paddle of a canoe hanging overhead. He stopped and twisted his lips and nose in a funny way. Berrie guessed that there were plenty of thoughts running through his head. "You think he's not going to tell everybody that one of Merimoné's people is here? And they'll think you're here to help."

"How's a rat going to talk?" Berrie blurted.

"You still think these are ordinary rats?"

She tried to take a deep breath but it just made her hack. "I don't know what to think. If I set up a hedge of protection, and they are who you say they are, they'll know I'm here."

"They know you're here already, Berrie."

"But they don't know who I am."

"They still may not know who you are. They may think you are here for a visit. They may think Merimoné did it."

"Merimoné. The sick one at home. She set a spell of protection." Berrie deadpanned.

"They may not know," he repeated.

"Maybe. Okay. Though it might be better if you closed up shop for a few days and stayed at home."

“Berrie, he’s running for re-election. He’s not going anywhere. I’d have to close up for good. Like Mr. Li. You know this is what we love to do. I love the store. Mixing up the medicines and potions and all the talk and trading. And Merimoné loves the kids. Especially since we can’t have kids of our own.” Berrie sighed. She knew that about them. Merimoné and a dwarf. Nobody said it would be easy but despite it all, they did love each other.

“Okay, just give me a few minutes to think and catch my breath. And I’ll make you a list.”

--VII--

After mixing up the same dusty concoction that Merimoné had used a month earlier, Berrie tossed it around the building outside and sing-sang the same words. Finished with that, she came inside and sat down to rest.

“If they got through once, won’t they get through again?” Gryff asked.

“We’re not done,” Berrie replied. “Do you have any cats around here?”

Gryff shrugged his shoulders. “Not regularly. Merimoné sets out a bowl of milk once in a while for a few of the neighborhood cats.”

“That’s all we need.” She gave him another list.

“A couple of cans of cat food.”

“That’s it.” She gave the tiniest, self satisfied smile.

Gryff handed the list to one of his clerks and turned back to Berrie. “He should be back in a flash.”

“That’s just enough time to blend what I need.” Using more of the items Gryffen had given her from her original list, she mixed a dry powder. She fashioned a cone out of a piece of paper and waited. The clerk returned.

“Now if you would open them up for me, please.”

The young man popped the pull tops and handed the cans to Berrie, who set them to the side.

“Thank you.”

As the clerk returned to his duties, Berrie arranged the cans in a straight line and shook the powder over the cat dinners. After she had finished, she chanted,

‘Tabby and Persian, whatever your breed  
Come to this place for a feline’s feast  
With each bite and morsel,  
Remember your lore  
Like lions and tigers with a mighty roar  
Chase the rats to the Jersey shore.’

“Now set these outside near the doors, Gryffen. I promise you, you will have no more problems with those rats.”

“Won’t the rats come and eat the food first?”

Berrie laughed. “No way. You’ll have your cats here before you can set the cans down.”

And she was right. There were half a dozen cats waiting for him outside, drawn by the smell.

He set the cans in the front and back of the store and came back in. “Will it work?”

“Gryffen, really,” she remonstrated. “Did you see the cats?”

“I’m sorry, Berrie. I know I should be used to this sort of thing.” He hung his head.

“Okay,” she relented. She had trouble standing up and Gryff gave her a hand. Feeling a tweak of something, she looked down at his face. He helped her with her cloak and hat. Leaning against a pillar for a few seconds, she said, “Well, I’m not getting any younger. It’s time to push off.”

“It’s my fault. I’m sorry to have kept you so long.” He looked up at her and something in his eyes and the touch of his hand gave away his thoughts.

Squinting hard at him, she said, “You knew all along you would get me to weave that spell.”

Again, he hung his head. "I admit it, Berrie. I was hoping ever since you said you were coming to town. Especially with Merimoné sick at home."

"If I had the energy, I would turn you into a toad," Berrie rebuked him.

"Please don't, I'm so short now," he whimpered.

She looked him over and chuckled slowly. "And have Merimoné married to a toady wart dispenser? Not on your life. She'd never forgive me."

"Then you don't mind."

"No, not much, my sweet little man," she said as she kissed the top of his head. "I don't know if everything you told me was true today, but hopefully I gave you some help. Please give my love to Merimoné."

"I will, I will. I most certainly will." He ran to the door and held it open. "You've been the greatest, biggest help. Thank you so much. I do hope you're home in seconds."

"I do wish it, too," she agreed. "Let's see what I can do." And with that, she said goodbye and left the store.

--VIII--

Out on the street, she blended in with the crowd and headed for the subway with the thought of reversing her trip. She had her token for the L6 to Grand Central Station and her train ticket from Central to her home station. The concoction that Gryffen had mixed for her seemed to help just a little but she still felt a burden on her soul, and in her chest, as if great and dreadful things were about to happen regardless of whether she were well or ill. She couldn't imagine what it meant. Thinking it over, she retraced the morning's events. She had made it to Gryffen's. And, although there was a lot of commotion in his store and she had to wave her wand a few times, all in all, the trip was really unremarkable. Oh, she would mention to her sisters about all the fun she had had with the kids and the tricks. And she'd relate the story of Gryffen's rats and Merimoné's illness – which was strange that they were all sick at the same time. But, then again, some of the more common bugs seem to hit the sisters and Merimoné a little harder, while some of the more exotic illnesses never touched them. She would definitely tell them about Merimoné's blue bumps, what Gryff called caeruleus dermatitis. All of that was odd but Gryff didn't seem overly concerned and he was the medical man.

The entrance to the subway stairs was just ahead. She thought about using the elevator off to the side because she was a bit winded with the chest congestion and there was a huge crowd standing in front. A larger crowd, it seemed, than normal. She followed the rest of the people down the stairs and bumped into a wall of flesh. Being way too short to see what was going on, she pulled out her wand and, like before, used it as a divining rod to find her way through the mob. One step left and angle, a half step right and angle, two steps left and angle, one free step forward, another right step and angle and then she was close enough to hear what was going on. In fact, she was far too close.

"Okay, back up, back up. BACK UP!!" A cop had his baton out and was waving it in front of him at the crowd. Several cops were doing the same thing. The problem was, there was no place to go. No one *could* back up. There were too many people. And more were bunching in. The whole mass inched forward.

"I said, BACK YOURSELF UP!" A cop swung and hit a young man in the side of his knee with his baton. The man clenched his teeth and his fists. "GO AHEAD AND DO IT!" The cop yelled at him.

"THE MAYOR IS ON THE WAY!" Another cop yelled.

"CLEAR THE WAY FOR THE MAYOR!"

"My word, what is going on?" Berrie asked a businessman, who was trying to stay upright and standing.

"Publicity shot for the mayor. He's going to pretend to ride the subway." He pointed at the empty train. Steam hissed up between the subway cars. "He'll get on. They'll take a few shots with him in the doorway. Then, they have a bunch of actors over there." He pointed behind the cops to a different crowd of people. "They'll get on and surround him and smile at him and say great things about him. A few more

pictures. A couple of quotes. He'll pretend to sign autographs and then they'll leave." He checked his watch. "And in the meantime, no one else can get on."

"That's not right." Berrie started sweating and coughing.

"No, it's not but that's the mayor."

Officers with dogs patrolled the front of the crowd and kept them in check. The dogs growled and one snapped at a homeless man in a tattered tweed overcoat.

"That's what happens," the cop grunted. His eyes flared and his gapped front teeth, as wide as piano keys, showed as he yelled, "Now, GET BACK!" His beefy arms held tightly onto the dog but he jabbed at the homeless man with his baton.

A group of protestors, their faces hidden by masks, closed the exit grates so no one could leave and then somehow made their way to the front. "Hey, ho, the mayor's got to go!" "Two, four, six, eight, the mayor's a man we all hate."

The cops with the dogs came running over to the protestors, who moved closer to Berrie. Standing up on their hind legs, the dogs slashed with their fangs and clawed at the protestors with their front paws. The businessman backed up and, in doing so, blocked Berrie from getting away. A woman and a boy were pushed and they stumbled into Berrie. She could feel their fear but there wasn't anything she could do for them. Things seemed out of control. She could barely move her arms. Catching a glimpse of the crowd forced all the way back to the black iron grating, she realized there was nothing she could do without causing undue attention to herself. She could turn half of them into ducks but she'd never be able to turn all of them into ducks. And even if she'd turned the ones she saw into ducks, there would be more people coming down the stairs and the elevators and she'd have to turn *them* into ducks and then, she'd have to sort out who really should remain a duck and who should be changed back into a person and somehow keep it all quiet and away from the evening news – all while the TV cameras were still recording. It was an impossible situation, so there really was nothing she could do. And more than once, her mother warned her and her sisters not to get involved in what she called the Riffles' affairs. 'There's more trouble to come of getting involved than to just stay away'. Berrie wasn't sure what 'more trouble' could be, though she was learning in her hundred plus years, but her mother was very serious. Of course, that didn't mean they couldn't help the humans with their individual problems but nothing on a grand scale, like the commotion in the subway. It was best to wait for her chance and do something small.

More protestors bumped into her. A cop shoved one of them who then shoved her. The air was too thick and dirty. It was so hard to breathe. She began to cough uncontrollably. Things seemed to whirl. The fluorescent lights distorted the skin colors. The white tiles of the subway station were a greasy grey. The concrete floors were damp and streaked with black goop. She could barely keep her feet with all the pushing. The human sentiment horrified her as all she felt with every bump was hate, anger and a desire to fight, hurt and maim.

Another police dog barked viciously and snapped, its teeth coming within an inch of the little boy's face - who was pinned next to her. The dog's spit slobbered the boy's face and the boy managed to get his arm up to wipe at it with his coat sleeve. The dog's breath and wet fur stunk. The woman held the boy tight. The boy whispered, "Mom," and tucked his head under her arm. The businessman wriggled his way past another girl in grey who was pushed up right behind the mother and child. Berrie couldn't see her face but noticed the grey hood and long blonde hair. The woman must have two children, Berrie thought. The noxious fumes made Berrie's eyes water.

Another wave of shouts went up. "The Mayor! Here he comes!"

"LOOK OUT!!"

"MAKE WAY!!"

The hum of the subway train, the discharge of steam, the trains on the other side of the tracks, and the general noise of the crowd made everything difficult to hear distinctly.

The dogs, angered by all of the noise, barked incessantly.

With his bodyguards all around him muscling their way, the mayor finally appeared. He didn't acknowledge the crowd. Standing a very solid six foot four, he was dressed in a charcoal grey suit, gold striped tie, and had short salt and pepper hair. His patented hook nose and grim face bobbed within the tight group of guards. Only after seeing the TV cameras did he manage a grin as the lights bathed him in an effervescent glow. While everyone around him sweated, his makeup held and he stayed perfectly dry. Sticking out his chest and square jaw, he felt like a Greek god.

One of the city hall flacks asked, "Going to take the subway today, Mr. Mayor?"

"Just another day, doing great things for this great city. I'd take it every day if I could." The mayor positively beamed. It was a great day to run for re-election. Even underneath the streets, he felt on top of the world.

The cameras hummed and buzzed. Questions were shouted. Some were answered, most were not. The protestors pressed closer and closer. The cops were nervous and shoved back on the crowd. They poked and stabbed and swung their clubs a little too freely. The crowd got angry. They couldn't escape. No place to go and they were being hit by the cops.

The mayor knew there was such a thing as being too accessible so he climbed on the train. His picture was taken once, twice, a hundred times. The fake crowd was let onto the train and they fawned all over the mayor. He loved the attention and wished more people understood him like the people on the train. Running a little late, he allowed more pictures to be taken.

One of the protestors threw a tomato at the mayor and missed. It thudded and splashed red against the white metal siding of the train and drip down. More tomatoes followed. More shouts. More noise. Broken bricks and rocks were heaved. The windows on the train cracked into spider webs. Iron bars were wielded by the masks. Curses were uttered, some by the mayor. Ducking, the bodyguards assumed a defensive posture as if the mayor were under an armed attack.

The dogs' hackles were raised as they snapped at the crowd. The boy next to Berrie, started to cry louder and louder. The newsmen turned their cameras on him and lit up his face with their hot bright lights which only made the kid more hysterical. Unused to having the attention pulled away from him but unable to move forward because of the photographers and TV cameras, the mayor yelled, "SOMEBODY DO SOMETHING!"

People began to look at the boy and the mayor. A camera swung the boy's way and he only cried louder. Berrie laid a hand on the boy's shoulder and tried to comfort him. She could feel sickness and panic in the boy. The mayor threw his hand up in front of the lens. "Not him, not him. Me! Look at ME!!" But the camera stayed on the crying kid. "What is wrong with you people, you stupid SHEEP!!" The mayor screamed. "CAN YOU PLEASE SHUT THAT KID UP!!"

More cameras clicked and flashed. Realizing the terrible publicity but unable to stop it, the mayor's bright red face contorted in anger. "ARREST THAT KID!! ARREST THESE PEOPLE!!" The mayor commanded and the cops jumped into the melee, brandishing their clubs. They let the dogs dig into the crowd and cut off the protestors from the most of commuters. With snaps and snarls and growls and bites, the cops cut a V shaped wedge into the mob, which contained all of the masked protestors and some of the innocent bystanders, including Berrie, the mother and the two children.

"LOCK THEM UP!"

Sobbing, the boy asked, "What's happening, mom?" He buried his head into his mother.

"We'll be alright. We'll be alright," she wrapped her arms around him and tried to comfort him. She turned to Berrie and said under her breath. "We can't be arrested. He's got cancer. He's got an appointment." But Berrie swooned with the fumes, the stress, her cough, her illness and the violence. She wanted to help but what could she do? She missed her sisters. How she really missed her oldest sister, Bernice, and then, of course, Bertyl. Bernie would know just what to do. And a crowd like this wouldn't bother Bertie. Not in the least, she would thrive in a crowd. And then she remembered. The

stardust. Maybe there was a way. Her hand dipped into the bag of stardust that Bertie had given her. She had just managed to raise her hand above her head when a cop grabbed her, shaking the pinch of stardust in her fingers. Just a few of the sprinkles landed on Berrie's face. Her face warmed and radiated but she managed to keep a tight hold on the rest of the stardust.

"Here's one. Can you believe it?" He grabbed her by the coat. "An old lady swinging her fists." He jostled her and she felt nothing but anger and sarcasm building up inside of him.

"I'm not fighting," Berrie said.

"Of course, you ain't, lady. Nobody is. We're all just dancing together."

The boy next to her cried.

"Somebody get that kid."

A masked protestor smacked the cop who held Berrie and he let her go. She instinctively took a step towards the children. She grabbed the young girl's arm with her free hand. Sliding her bags with a foot so they nestled between her legs, the little group of four huddled together. The mayor stood right before them and stared down at the shaking little boy. "GET RID OF THIS BRATTY KID RIGHT NOW!" He roared. He leaned towards them.

"Right now is the right time," Berrie agreed.

She sprinkled the dust over the four of them.

The mayor's mouth opened once again to shout a command. He reached out with a hand and they disappeared right in front of the mayor's eyes. There was no sound but it was like a POOF! He blinked once. He blinked twice. And, comically, he blinked three times.

"WHERE DID THEY GO? WHERE DID THEY GO?"

He ran around and around like a dog chasing his tail, all the while the cameras rolled. Suddenly realizing his ridiculousness, he stopped but he was too dizzy to stand still. He wobbled and fell down on his butt.

The cameras caught that, too. Sitting on the concrete floor, he ordered, "GET THEM!"

"On to the train now, before it leaves," Berrie told the other three. She looped her arm through her bags and yet, somehow, kept them in touch with each other. As long as they touched one another, they could see a translucent outline of each other. They all moved together.

"What's happening?" The mother asked. She held on to the boy tightly and to Berrie's arm.

"Nothing. They seem a little confused is all and now's our chance. Let's go!" Berrie hustled them onto the subway just as the doors closed again. They collapsed onto the seats and had the car all to themselves. The train started up and they stared at the mayor, the lights, the cameras, and the cops.

As the four turned visible again, the mayor spotted them and pointed straight at them. "THERE THEY ARE!!" Berrie could read his lips but she couldn't hear him over the engines, the wheels, the crowd and the noise. Standing with his arm still raised in a kind of a Nazi salute, the mayor mouthed some mute instructions. The cameras flashed. With the mayor's eyes trained right on her, Berrie picked out her wand and coaxed a little Hitler mustache from the mayor's upper lip. Every single camera in the underground station snapped his picture. Seconds later the group of four were whisked down the track.

--IX--

Berrie slumped in her seat. "Thank goodness that's over." The boy and his mom sat across from her.

The young girl sat off to the boy's side.

The boy's mom bopped excitedly in their seat. She turned from Berrie to her son to the windows and back again. "How did you do that? That was amazing! We were invisible. We were invisible, I think," she repeated as if doubting herself. "We *were* invisible, weren't we?" she asked her son, who seemed to brightened up a bit which gave her a smile. "Did you see the mayor? He was furious! He was barking as bad as the dogs."

Berrie leaned forward and held her head in her hands.

"Are you alright?" the mom asked Berrie.

Realizing the mother would only have more worries if she mentioned the flu, Berrie replied, "Just all of the excitement I guess. Has me flustered." Had her sweating was more like it. She hoped she could keep from coughing, at least until she got off the train.

"I've never seen anything like it. It was so scary at first! I didn't think they'd let us go. And then what you did for us. And then what you did to the mayor. He'll never live that down." The mother twittered nervously and she picked at her son's clothing - just making sure he was really all there. "Thank you for helping us get out of there."

"Oh, it was nothing," Berrie tried to dismiss the conversation.

"But the mustache!"

"What mustache?"

"The mayor! You drew a little mustache on him, like Hitler."

"Me? He might have gotten dirty sitting on that nasty concrete floor. It wouldn't hurt city services to concentrate on cleaning that subway a little more often."

"Oh, I don't know. That was so frightening, but so funny! Thank you," the mom repeated. The girl smiled at Berrie but at the same time seemed to look more closely at her.

Berrie blushed at the girl and turned to the mother. "You're welcome." Berrie then looked kindly at the boy. She wondered what type of cancer he had but knew such a question was way too personal.

As if reading her thoughts, the mother said, "We couldn't miss this appointment. We will find out the treatment plan today." She bent down to her son and said, "The doctors will let us know what we need to do to make you well again." The girl glanced over at them.

At the Astor stop, the train began to fill up. The girl scooted closer to the boy. More people joined at Union Square and the girl sat right next to him; in fact, they bumped up together. The girl didn't attempt to move apart. Berrie lifted her eyes at them for a second. Such a sweet sister to the boy. A warm glow seemed to engulf them briefly, a golden shine. Nothing anyone else noticed but it was the kind of thing Berrie and her sisters could see. The mother was looking elsewhere and missed the moment. It was the something that she wouldn't see but a mother would have sensed but she wasn't paying attention. She was looking ahead for their stop. Then the girl managed to separate a quarter of an inch and the aura died out.

"Come on, Robert," the mother grabbed the boy's hand. "Here's our stop." She turned to Berrie. "Thank you again," she said and they got off. The girl, surprisingly, didn't follow.

Sitting directly across from each other, Berrie asked, "Wasn't that your mom? Aren't you getting off with them?"

"No."

"No?"

"No."

"That's not your mom?" She asked with a frown.

"No."

"You don't know them?"

"No."

Berrie pulled her head back and she scrunched her face. Suddenly, she began to look at the girl in a new light. Dressed in a grey cloak, a blue dress and pink dancer's shoes, she had the prettiest light violet eyes. They were as clear and as deep as a mountain lake. Berrie couldn't think of another question while she looked at her. She was fascinating. Even across the aisle, the girl smelled like a fresh summer morning. There was something utterly strange about her. The dark foreboding that oppressed Berrie all morning lifted in a flash. Berrie's face relaxed. With her eyes upon the girl, she felt peaceful.

Then Berrie looked away. So surprising was the girl that she expected her to be gone when she looked back, but she wasn't. She was still there. So Berrie asked another question. An easy question.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" Now, that was a kicker. "Going home, perhaps?"

"No." She shook her head. "I don't live here." She said it so placidly that Berrie tried to grasp a deeper meaning. Everything the girl said, which was very little, seemed to mean more than she said. She felt a kind of uneasiness, not from the girl herself but from a growing realization. "You do have a mother and a father, don't you?"

The girl hesitated. Berrie waited on the answer even though she knew what it would be.

"No."

Berrie wished she could say she was shocked. It would have made it easier to just take her to children's services or the transit authorities but she wasn't surprised. The answer was exactly what she had expected but the situation was not.

The subway slowed as it pulled into Grand Central Station.

Berrie quickly thought it over. Here was a girl of maybe ten, orphaned and alone in New York City, and she didn't know where she was going. The subway was full of business people who paid little to no attention to anyone but themselves and miscreants who paid way too much attention to anyone who wasn't themselves, especially young girls.

She took the girl's hand. "You should get off, here, with me." Carrying the medicine and shopping bags, her purse under her arm and with a hand on the girl, they headed for the subway door. Berrie called back to the girl while looking ahead, "What's your name?"

"Sanaré," she answered.

"Really?" Berrie snuck a quick glance back, then ahead again. She pulled her through the doors and disembarked off the subway. They took a step to the side to get out of the way of the other passengers. They kept moving.

"That boy. I thought he was your brother. What did you do to him?"

"I helped him."

"I thought so," she said and she smiled at her. "I'd like to ask you more but we've got to go." Berrie could only imagine the mother's joy.

They headed for the connections to take the train to the little town above the Hudson. From there, she didn't know what she would do. Her plans didn't extend much beyond the train. Riding an escalator up to the main floor, Berrie turned right. Slowed by all of the morning's activities, she was winded. After two steps, she grasped the girl's arm and pulled her to the side.

Huffing and puffing, then, looking up, she rasped, "Uh-oh, this can't be good."

The entire main hall of Grand Central Station was at a standstill. Everybody was staring at either a news kiosk, a TV, or they were stuffed inside a bar that had a TV. A film clip showed the mayor with his Hitler mustache and his arm up in a Nazi salute. Oooohs and ahhs, snickers, chuckles, and even personal epithets were whispered by the people in the station. The clip seemed to be on a sixty second loop with a few additional seconds of commentary. And then the cameras panned and showed close-ups of the mayor shouting out orders, the cops swinging their clubs, the dogs snarling and snapping, the protestors pushed into a corner, and then there were pictures of a mother and her son and two other people. The pictures of the mother and son were clear but the two other people - someone said an older woman and a girl - were either out of focus or had a bright glare that obscured their faces - except for the briefest of moments where half of the young girl's face was captured. The screen showed a grainy still shot.

Berrie stared at the TV and then at the girl. She turned the girl's head to the side with her fingers.

"HMMMMM. Maybe. Someone just might identify you."

The news continued. "Now look at this, Marian," a TV commentator said to his partner. "The mayor has no mustache here in these photos on the subway but just minutes later, here, he has a Hitler mustache."

"Is it a joke, Brad?"

“A pretty poor joke around election time, if you ask me.”

“But it is near Halloween.”

“Well,” the commentator continued self-righteously, “I wouldn’t want to be photographed as Hitler no matter what time of year but especially an election year.”

“The mayor does have a lot of explaining to do,” Marian agreed.

“To the contrary, his office has not issued an apology or an explanation for the morning’s activities. It seems that Mr. Mayor is only interested in finding these people, especially blaming ‘the old woman’ for what his office calls an ‘unfortunate event’.”

“Ah, if in doubt, blame the old gypsy woman on Halloween,” Marian quipped. “Such a sexist attitude, Mr. Mayor.”

“It would seem so, Marian. It would seem so.”

Berrie dug through her purse and pulled out the piece of charcoal that Bertie had given her for ‘smudging’ her identification. Dear old Bertie. Berrie would no longer doubt her older sister’s sixth sense. She streaked Sanaré’s cheeks and hands and did the same to herself. She sprinkled the last of the stardust over the both of them and hoped that they could travel the rest of the way home undetected – for that was exactly what she had determined she should do – bring the girl home to Rivahurst, their home in the woods above the river.

©2018 Bill Judge