



DARK

LIVES

Volume 1

NARIELLE LIVING
SUSAN WILLIAMSON

DARK LIVES

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For everyone who loves a scary story.

INTRODUCTION

Halloween is the time of year when we are able to indulge ourselves in all things scary: stories, haunted houses, haunted hayrides, ghost tours... It is a time to have fun with the idea of spooky things. That is why these two stories are being offered free at this time of year; it's our treat for you.

Narielle Living's piece, *Hidden Treasures*, is a dark story that will resonate with many caregivers. This one, though, has a fatal twist.

Susan Williamson's story, *Green Men vs. Green Acres*, details what can happen in the barn when little green men appear.

We hope you enjoy these two short stories by our mystery writers Narielle and Susan. If you like their work, be sure to check out their full-length books!

You can find us at blue-fortune.com or any of your favorite bookstores.

Happy Halloween,

Blue Fortune Enterprises

HIDDEN TREASURES

BY NARIELLE LIVING

SUZANNE'S DEATH WAS NOT A drawn-out affair, but rather a spiraling into the disease, lasting a few short years that stretched into an emotional abyss. Of course we didn't realize anything was wrong until she was in the secondary stage, the stage where you cannot ignore the confusion, demands, and behavior. I think my mother knew something was wrong long before we did, but like so many with this problem, she did her best to cover it up. She did a good job with that, too, but it turned out that Suzanne was good at covering things, especially important things. Although my mother was aware that she had this illness, she was unable to escape the shadow that was darkening her body and mind. It terrified her, as it would terrify anyone, and all I could do was hold her hand when she looked at me in fear.

“What’s happening to me?” she asked. “How will this end?”

I knew the answer, of course, but I avoided saying it.

Instead, I gave her what I could. “I’ll be here with you, we’ll do this together.” It was the only answer I had.

People often assumed it was Alzheimer’s because that was what they were familiar with. “No,” I would explain, “Lewy Body Dementia is like a combination of Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s.” Of course it was so much more, as any caregiver knew, but I didn’t want to bore my friends. There were the constant hallucinations of non-existent people that kept her awake at night; the tremors that made holding a fork almost impossible; the confusion about whether it was day or night; the drooling that had me searching online for adult-sized bibs... These were not things most people could relate to, and my deep exhaustion wiped out both my desire and ability to explain it.

Then there were the times we weren’t sure if she was hallucinating—or not. “I kept them all,” she said to me one night as she sat, staring out the window. “I won’t give them up. They are here, all of them.”

The people I communicated with on the caregivers forum all said the same thing. *She doesn’t know what she’s saying... Her reality is not the same... It’s the disease talking...* But they weren’t sitting with her when she looked right through me, eyes cold and vacant. “You’re the only one I kept, Tessa. The only one.”

Like always, I didn’t ask too many questions. I didn’t even know what to ask.



The thunk of the lid closing on the car trunk jolted Tessa awake. That, and the voices outside her window.

"I think you're paranoid."

"No, I'm not. I can't risk them finding us. Tessa would be—"

"She'll be fine. We've been over this before." The ticking of the grandfather clock reminded Tessa of the bombs that she'd seen in cartoons. She wondered how long it would be before the explosion.

The front door opened and shut, and footsteps marched past her closed bedroom door. The darkness of the night closed in on her, and a panicked sensation crawled up her chest. Her breath caught in her throat as she fumbled next to her bed, trying to find the small switch on the nightlight. She hadn't needed to use it since the last time they moved.

Somewhere from the direction of the kitchen a door slammed shut and noises that made no sense filtered into her room. Voices were raised again.

"She's only eight years old. She'll be fine."

"Until someone in her class starts asking questions. Or the neighbors get nosy."

Tessa's hands were sweating as she finally grasped at the nightlight switch, and she managed to flick it on. Only nothing happened. Desperation rose through her body as she fought away images of unseen terror that she knew were lurking just within reach.

"You worry too much. We know how to handle all that. We've done it before."

As the darkness around her grew, Tessa closed her eyes and tried to become as small as possible. Maybe, if she became really, really small, nobody would notice her. Because as much as she loved her parents, sometimes she thought she loved them too much. If she loved them less, she'd be able to tell them about the darkness they caused. If she loved them less, she'd be able to tell them that

sometimes they made her stomach hurt. If she loved them less, she'd have the courage to run away.



The night she died I sat by her bed, holding her hand and crooning softly in her ear. “You are loved... you can go now. Daddy is there, he’s waiting. Go find peace.”

I didn’t know if she could hear me in her morphine-hazed coma, but I needed to say it. I needed to tell her I loved her, that a piece of her lived within my heart, always. I wanted to tell her that I treasured her, and I knew how lucky I’d been to have her as a mother.

“Treasure” was her term for me when I was a kid. She would cup my chin softly and say, “You are my dearest treasure.” I never thought about it much. Isn’t that what all mothers say? Despite the fact that we moved all the time, despite the arguments I overheard as a kid, I always knew my parents loved me. They loved me so much it sometimes overwhelmed me, but then my guilt crept in for feeling that way. At least I had parents who cared.

During the time her disease held a fierce grip on her, she would wander through her house mumbling, “Gotta find my lost treasures... I put them here somewhere.” The doctors told me not to expect her words to make any sense. My ten-year-old daughter, however, was convinced that grandma had hidden gold, jewels, or money somewhere in the house, a sentiment my husband Frank echoed.

“She is getting a little odd, with her age and this disease,” Frank said to me one night. “What if your mother has been squirreling away money or something? You hear about it all

the time, old people who hide cash under the mattress or in books. Maybe it's part of this Lewy Body thing."

My husband had a point; people did do things like that, but since I had power of attorney and handled all my mother's bills and bank accounts, I knew there wasn't enough left over for her to be hiding anything. At most, she would have been able to put aside ten dollars or so a month.

I sometimes wondered if my daughter was correct, though. The way my mother talked led me to think that she very well could have hidden something in her house. "Mom, think about it," Abby said one day after school. "Grandma probably has, like, tons of jewelry, and maybe she's hidden diamonds or something because she's not right in the head."

"Abby," I said. "It's not nice to talk about your grandmother that way. She can't help it that she has this disease."

"I know, but how cool would it be if we found out she had, like, rings and necklaces that were worth a ton of money?" she continued around a mouthful of strawberry Pop Tart.

"Abby, I doubt very much that your grandmother has amassed a fortune in jewelry," I said. But as I thought about it, I wondered if Abby might be right. It was hard to tell what my mother was trying to communicate sometimes, but every day just before dinner she would wander through the house muttering about treasure.

"Here, right here, I can't remember where I put them. I know they're here, I hid them. You've got to help me."

"Mom, we'll find your treasure. How about you come and sit at the table and try to eat a little?" My answer never really satisfied her, and I knew from the angry looks she gave me that she understood I was trying to placate her.

I spent a lot of time trying to placate her.

Every night was a battle to brush her teeth, and every morning was a battle to bathe her. “No-o-o-o,” she would wail, flailing her arms and legs in a useless attempt to push me away. “I can’t, the planes are going to get thrown at me... the zoo is on fire... your father knows, he knows, he’s going to come get me... no, no, no!”

It didn’t make any sense to me, but I couldn’t very well let my mother not bathe or brush her teeth. So I did the best I could, which sometimes wasn’t enough, and I hoped I could find it in my heart to forgive us both for the struggles that ended in tears, both mine and hers.

Frank and I had decided it would be best if I quit my part-time job, especially since Frank was worried about my health. “Caregivers sometimes end up getting sick, too,” he said. “I’ve been reading about this, and I want to find a way to make sure you’re not overwhelmed through all of this. Don’t worry about the money, I’ll work extra and make up for it. But we need you to be healthy, okay?”

He was right, of course. Caregivers do get sick from taking care of loved ones, probably from the emotional battle they fight daily when they have to give medication that won’t work or guide food to the mouth of someone who has forgotten how to eat or change an adult diaper. It is emotionally exhausting to love someone with this disease, but there is no way around it.

I tried not to complain because I knew I was luckier than most. My husband helped me in every way possible, even lifting my mother into the bathtub, and my in-laws made sure they were available if I needed someone to stay with

Abby at night. Plus, my mother had an insurance policy that paid for in-home care forty hours per week, a huge benefit to all of us. *Thank you for having the foresight to get this, mom*, I often thought as I met the nurse's aid at the door. My mother had no other relatives that I knew of, no brothers, sisters, or even distant cousins, which meant that Mom knew years ago I would be the one to shoulder any of her health burdens.

Shawnell, the home health aide, was referred by an agency, and she became my life support through this time. She taught me how to safely move my mother when mom couldn't walk, she helped figure out a workable schedule for me and my family, and she never lost her patience with any of us.

Shawnell was the one who gently insisted it was time to call hospice. "They can get us a bed and equipment we need and help her to the next stage."

The next stage was nothing more than a pleasant way of saying death.

And so my mother died with me at her bedside, leaving behind a family that loved her and missed her and a house full of memories.

It took me a few weeks to begin to clean out her house. There was so much paperwork that needed to be done and I really had to catch up on my sleep. At that point my exhaustion was a constant friend, but it was one of those friends that you don't want to pick up the phone to talk to.

It was a fresh, clean spring day when Frank, Abby and I finally tackled my mother's house. It was not the house I'd grown up in, as my parents had lived in a number of different places, including Wisconsin, Ohio, Connecticut, and then finally Virginia. I'd like to think that once I settled here

with Frank and Abby, they chose to move to Virginia to be close to their daughter and granddaughter. I'd never had any family around when I was growing up, it was just me and my parents, and I sometimes yearned for a large family to bicker with. When mom and dad decided to move here it meant the world to me.

Of course, with no other family it fell to Frank and me to do everything. First, the house needed to be emptied. We borrowed a friend's pickup truck for trips to the dump, and we brought boxes to pack anything that might be deemed worthy of saving.

It was overwhelming.

The plan was to send dishes, glasses and flatware to the local thrift shop, as well as clothing, handbags, and shoes. I didn't mind packing the kitchen things, but the clothes were difficult for me to sort through. This was something so personal, and I couldn't help but wonder who would pack my clothes when death came for me. Would Abby have to sort through everything? Would she feel despair at my death, or would she be practical and efficient? At that moment she was diligently working in her grandmother's closet, rifling through all the pockets.

"Abby, what are you doing?" I asked.

"Just looking," she said.

"That's a good idea," Frank said. "You never know what might be crammed in there. Check before we give anything away."

My head hurt. "Let me know what you find." I knew they were looking for my mother's so-called treasure, but my husband had a point. I stuffed things in my pockets all the

time, so it was likely they would find something, even if it was only an old grocery list.

“Hey, mom?” Abby called. “This is kind of weird.”

She held something in her hand. “What is it?”

“Grapes, I think,” she said. “I’ve been finding them in the closet, grapes in her purses, in her pockets, all over the place. Why did she have grapes in her room? Some of them are gross, and they stained the clothes.”

I sighed. “I think she probably started doing that when she got sick and we just didn’t know it. Wash your hands, okay?”

I found more grapes in the kitchen, mostly in the freezer. I’d never noticed it before, but they were stuffed in freezer bags and shoved to the back of the freezer, the forgotten place where food goes to die. I counted thirteen bags in the kitchen freezer, then went out to the garage where she had another freezer she sometimes used for meats. All this time I had assumed it was empty.

There were fifty-two bags of freezer-burned grapes and nothing else. There were so damn many of them, tucked everywhere like nuggets of inescapable truths, telling me that her disease had had control for much longer than we’d thought. My mother hadn’t been grocery shopping in over a year.

I wondered exactly when a disease like this begins to dictate a person’s actions. Was there a time, long ago, when I should have realized she was ill? Was there a time when I thought she was being unreasonable, but it was actually the onset of Lewy Body Dementia?

It didn’t matter now, and these thoughts were probably best left unexplored.

I continued to throw away heaps of food that could not be eaten, putting canned goods and unopened cereal boxes into bags to bring to the soup kitchen later.

“Mom!”

I froze at the terrified sound in my daughter’s voice, then dropped a can of baked beans and raced up the stairs.

“Where are you?” I called. Frank met me in the hallway.

“The attic.”

“Is she crying?” Frank asked as we both scrambled to climb the stairs that we’d pulled down only hours before.

Poking my head through the rectangular hole, I could see Abby standing in the far corner of the dimly lit space. “What is it?”

Without a word, she held up what looked like doll’s clothes.

“What’s that?” Frank said.

“I found it,” Abby answered in a very small voice.

“Is it from a doll?” I asked, walking to where my daughter stood, shaking. “Honey, what’s wrong?”

She shook her head and pointed to a wall of sheetrock. “You can go behind there if you squeeze through that opening.” I stepped forward to look. I’d never been in this attic before, since I had no reason to go there. Abby was right; there was a narrow space between the sheetrock and the wall stud that a person could squeeze through. Without a word, Abby handed me a flashlight.

The first thing I saw was a row of doll-sized clothing laid side-by-side. The air grew heavy around me. “What is it?” I whispered.

“Look closer, mom.”

That’s when I saw the pale gleam of white, the tiny skulls,

the little fingers. Three little bodies, placed on blankets. Two blue blankets with boats and one pink with flowers. Next to each, a small stuffed animal. My stomach heaved. I dropped the flashlight and ran out of the attic.

Later, when the police arrived and there was bustling and activity and tiny body bags, my husband and I sat at the kitchen table nursing our coffee. Abby had been sent to a friend's house after she answered questions from the police.

"Do you think she had some kind of postpartum thing?" Frank whispered.

"She always told daddy that I was a treasure worth keeping," I whispered back, numb. "I was the one worth keeping."

We looked at each other in silence, holding hands across the table. "I guess we've found it," I said. Frank nodded, knowing what I meant. We'd found my mother's hidden treasures.

"Did you have any idea?" Frank said.

"No," I answered. "But I'm sure I'll remember little things that will mean something else now."

I looked out the window at the purple smudged sky. Night was here. *Who do I grieve for now? The mother I knew? The mother she was? My siblings?* I had no doubt that those babies in the attic were related to me. And where did my father fit into this?

Frank's grip tightened on my hand. "I love you," he said. I held on, watching the sky continue to darken and shadows deepen.

GREEN MEN VS. GREEN ACRES

BY SUSAN WILLIAMSON

I HAD THROWN THE LAST bale of hay from the loft onto the truck bed and climbed down the ladder, hoping to beat the storm that thundered in the distance. I jumped in the truck and shifted to reverse, stepping on the gas pedal so I wouldn't spin in the muddy patch outside the barn. The truck slammed to a stop, throwing me against the steering wheel as I heard the screech of bending metal and tinkle of breaking glass. I threw open the door and ran to the back to see—

Nothing, there was nothing there, except my bent bumper and broken tail lights. What the hell?

“Oh, I guess you earthling humans can't see that color. So sorry, my bad.” A small man encased in tan coveralls was standing on the far side of... whatever I had hit, but couldn't see.

I was so stressed that the absurdity of the situation had not

yet registered. “What the heck are you doing in the middle of my barnyard in the dark in a storm with your non-earthly invisible vehicle? Can you move it out of the way? I have to get out to the horses before all hell breaks loose.”

Sanity or something was returning. Did I just run into a UFO? Was I talking to an alien-alien? I mean as opposed to a Syrian refugee or illegal Mexican? And where did he get the corny language?

“Actually, I’m on a mission but I had a mishap and decided to stop here when I saw your lights. Forgot you couldn’t see me. I meant to land a bit farther away, but I slid when I hit the mud. It looks as though you’ve bent my stabilizer. If you’ll pull forward, I might be able to move out of your way.”

I carefully climbed back in the truck, put it in first gear, and stepped on the gas pedal. With a wrenching noise of disconnection, the truck lurched toward the barn. A light flashed and disappeared. I cautiously walked behind the truck with my hands in front of me. I was crunching broken tail lights under foot but there was only air in my path.

Very slowly, I backed away from the barn and headed toward the pasture. When I came alongside the fence, the horses whinnied and circled, demanding their hay, but also nervous. Had they seen or sensed the UFO? And where did it go? If I hadn’t seen the damage to the rear of my truck, I would have begun to think I had fallen and passed out and this was a dream.

I hoisted myself into the truck bed and began to cut the strings and toss sections of hay over the fence. Lightning lit up the sky, blinding me when I looked down. I reached for the last bale of hay, or where I thought it was. It wasn’t.

I heard a thump as a bale flew over my head and landed somewhere beyond the horses. I jumped when a voice came from behind me.

“Can they open it themselves?”

Holy shit. “You’ve got to quit sneaking up on me. And, yes, they can pull out the hay, but there’s a danger they’ll eat the strings or get tangled in them.”

A light flashed and a laser singed the strings off the hay before igniting the entire bale.

“Oh, you didn’t tell me it was flammable.”

The horses snorted and took off into the darkness. “You didn’t ask, did you?” I was beginning to think that despite the common language there was a bit of confusion in our intergalactic communication. Was this how it worked at the UN? A horrendous boom of thunder shook the truck. I clambered for the safety of the cab.

Mr. Alien was already ensconced in the passenger seat. “I really don’t care for rain, and I can’t work on my craft during electrical disturbances.”

“And that’s my problem, why?”

“I expected rural residents to be more helpful. Are you inviting me to dine with you?”

“Do you eat peanut butter and jelly?”

My hair stood on end before the lightning hit. With a loud crack, a tree crashed onto the rear of my truck bed. I dove to the floor.

The storm was easing when I woke up. I was shaking all over, but unhurt except for a small bump on my head where I must have hit the steering wheel.

My passenger seat was empty.

About The Author

NARIELLE LIVING is a freelance writer based out of the tidewater area of Virginia. In addition to writing mysteries, she is the editor of the Williamsburg magazine *Next Door Neighbors* and has written hundreds of do-it-yourself articles for online magazines. Her mysteries include *Signs of the South*, *Revenge of the Past*, and *Madness in Brewster Square*, and she co-authored *Chesapeake Bay Karma—The Amulet*. Her fiction also appears in the anthologies *Chesapeake Bay Christmas Volume I*, *Chesapeake Bay Christmas Volume II*, *Chesapeake Bay Christmas Volume III*, and *Harboring Secrets*. She edits both fiction and nonfiction, and loves helping other writers achieve their goals. Narielle is currently working on the next books in the Brewster Square series as well as other fun writing projects. For information about her books or workshops, visit www.narielleliving.com or find her on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

About the Author

SUSAN WILLIAMSON grew up on a horse, cattle, hog and sheep farm in Western Pennsylvania. She completed a BS in Agriculture from the University of Kentucky and earned an MS from the University of California, Davis. After meeting at a horse show, she and her husband raised their family in rural Kentucky before moving to North Carolina to operate a horse training, breeding, lesson and boarding farm. She has been an extension agent, newspaper editor, educator, food coop manager, and professional horsewoman. She is the author of three novels: *Desert Tail*, *Tangled Tail* and *Dead on the Trail*. She currently resides in Williamsburg, VA with her husband and Labradoodle and is a contributor to *Next Door Neighbors* and *Tidewater Women* magazines.