

Eric Seiley
Burning Bridges As We Go
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Four Magic Places

Colfax

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

There were warning signs before Mom was taken away. Oddly eerie music playing on heavy vinyl records from her bedroom, strange dancing rituals behind locked doors, and her chanting late into the night. And most frightening, hearing Mom whispering outside my locked bedroom door.

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

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

"Mom, please. You don't act so....you don't go out into the woods at night when you take your medication. And you don't talk out loud to yourself. You haven't bathed in a month. Or cooked, or gone to work, or driven me to school or anything. I don't want you to get too far out there. You know what will happen if you do."

“Don’t worry, honey. I’m just in transition. Getting back to my true self. I know what I’m doing. But if I take those medications, they might interfere with the power of my thoughts. I can’t let that happen.”

“Mom. Please.”

“Don’t worry, Sukie. I’m good. And it’ll all become clear soon. Just you wait and see. My mind is healing everything. And I’ve been able to clarify my thoughts more efficiently without those poison pills the doctor keeps trying to foist on me. I can see the way to everything now. Plus, it’s as much for you as for me, you know.”

I was afraid to ask further what she meant. Mostly I was afraid *for* Mom rather than afraid *of* her. A small, but significant distinction when talking to her doctor. But still, when she went off her meds, things could get scary. There’d been incidents before.

The final straw this time, which prompted the neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Briggs, to call the police, began the morning Mom returned home early from one of her nighttime walks.

“I made it, Sukie! I finally broke through and now my path is clear.”

“Clear of what, Mom?” I asked.

“No time to explain. I have work to do.”

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

I haven’t always been my mother’s caretaker, you know. There was a time when we were normal and Mom behaved normal. Well, normal-ish. She would take me to school after my father left for work. Pick me up. Play with me in the park, bake cookies for the PTA, and even cook dinner while my father helped with my homework in the evenings. We were a nice little family and the epitome of three being a magic

number. Yet there was always something a little different about Mom too. Things she did other mother's didn't.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mom, I don't think you should be painting the neighbor's house without their permission. Mrs. Briggs said we need to stay on our side of the fence because her husband gets really upset when you don't. What is she going to say when they find out you're painting their house."

"Oh what does that woman know? Her spirit is as flat as her ass in her stupid mom jeans. And she doesn't even have kids. She's about as pedantic as a banana slug and will never soar. I feel sorry for her."

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

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

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

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

"Mom, I don't know what you mean. I never understand what you're talking about when you go off your medications. Maybe I should call Dr. Patterson again and get you in for an appointment. He really wants to see you."

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

"I guess so."

Fifteen minutes later, while I was writing an apology letter to the neighbor explaining what happened, Mom left the house again.

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

I wasn't fast enough to catch her. Nor did I know where she was going. An hour later she returned.

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

"It's too portentous a day," she pronounced, "to let all this dead flesh be left for people to buy and ingest. It's criminal. They don't release these animals need to live again. To reclaim their spirit. And they can too if you know how to harness their energy. I know how and intend to help them live again."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're crazy!" Mrs. Briggs yelled stepping in between Mom and her husband. "Just insane!" But then ran screaming back into her house when Mom looked at her and smiled.

Mom might not have looked like much, but she was a solid featherweight, trained to box by my grandfather – himself a ranked professional with the Golden Glove Boxing Federation since before the war.

"You're so done," Mr. Briggs sputtered, "I'm callin' the cops."

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

The police, when they arrested her, were very gentle placing her into custody.

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

“I will, Mom.”

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

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

Sierra Tucson

With Mom at the state psychiatric hospital for the long haul, at least according to her newly appointed, vaguely uptight psychiatrist, Dr. Singh, it was determined by people I’d never met that I could go live with my grandmother as soon as arrangements could be made. But they wouldn’t let me see Mom before then to say goodbye. I was given

permission to meet with Dr. Singh and my social worker for something called a “goal’s conference” though.

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

She winked at me. I didn’t like it.

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

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

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

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

"Yes?" I asked.

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

"What? Witchcraft? Never! She's never said or did anything like that," I lied.

"Are you sure? She's been claiming pythonesses status since she got here -- speaking rituals and insisting she's just fulfilling her potential. It's obvious she's been acting on this belief for some time. Which may be at the heart of her troubles. I'm a bit concerned with how tenacious she's being about the apochryphetic aspects of her "power" returning. Maybe your father could provide a little clarity on the matter?"

"Sure, only he died in a car accident," I replied. I didn't tell her that it was because Mom, while manic, had driven our Toyota Sierra van directly into the path of a large delivery truck and Dad was the first to feel the impact.

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

"Two years ago," I said.

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

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

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

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

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

Thank goodness Grandmother was no stranger. Gran had been visiting us in California, staying with Mom, Dad, and me, every Christmas to New Years since I was a baby. And Mom and Dad always took me back to Oklahoma every summer to stay with Gran and Granddad while she and Dad took time to “rekindle” their marriage and keep things “fresh.”

Gran was also the first to fly in after Dad died two years ago and lived with Mom and I for six months. She and Mom argued a lot, especially about Mom keeping me in California. She wanted both of us to move back to Oklahoma with her, but Mom was insistent about staying where we were.

“I won’t have you undermining me like you did when I young,” Mom yelled the last night Gran was with us in California, “Or have you questioning my parenting

decisions! Claiming to know what's best! My husband is here! Sukie's father is here! Our place is here with him! I know what's best for Sukie! And for me!"

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

"How dare you! I will not abandon my husband. You haven't left yours even though he's buried in the back field. So why do you think I will mine. My place is here with my husband! And if you can't get that through your stubborn head, then I think you need to leave! If you don't, you know what will happen."

Gran knew Mom well enough to leave. But before she did, she made sure I knew I could go with her. Just say the word and she'd make it happen. I admit I really wanted to – to leave California and Dad's death and Mom's mood swings. But I felt guilty too. How could I leave and not hurt Mom in the process? She'd believe I abandoned her. And if Mom wouldn't go, what choice did I really have? So I told Gran I would be okay and everything would be fine. But I would call her if needed.

"I love you, sweetheart," Gran said. "Take care of yourself. If things get too rough, you will always have a place with me."

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

Updike Hollow at Idabel

"Ho, there young lady!" Gran called out tapping me on the shoulder while I stood looking around the bus station at Glinda.

"GRAN!" I exclaimed, "how do you do that?" She'd surprised me by walking up from behind on an otherwise empty platform in the middle of nowhere, USA.

"It's so good to see you! Now, give me a hug," Gran said opening her arms wide.

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

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

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

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

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

"Not good. She was in lock down when I left for trying to hurt people. It doesn't look good."

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

I grabbed my backpack and followed Gran over to her truck for the drive back to her home in Updike Hollow. Gran lived just outside of town on twenty-seven acres along

the Elphaba River -- in a giant Victorian the locals referred to as "Grasslands." Which is to say a big house surrounded by a large garden centered in a huge expanse of open land, with a single country road leading both in and out. Idabel was fifty miles southwest and Eastwick forty miles north. With the nearest big city, Tulsa, clear on the other side of the state. So the Grasslands at Updike Hollow was a special place and once, in the 50's, 60's, and 1970's, had been the center of the social universe for many people who lived in the area.

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

Updike Hollow Grasslands always lived in my memory as the one place I felt most at home. And for good reason. A huge open air botanical garden overflowing the white picket fences surrounding it, with a tall spired, three story Victorian sitting smack in the middle. The whole place looked like a castle rising out of a sea of green wilderness. Plants, bushes, and trees competed for space with pathways wandering in and around in all directions, under cypress trees, past Azalea and Hedera, creating secret little enclaves throughout the entire property. Gran's favorite tree -- a giant Elm -- stood like an ancient sentinel out front, complete with a rope swing hanging down which her own grandfather'd hung up. And the wonderful smells! Orchids and passion flowers intertwined with achiote and heliconia, while rosemary, nasturtium, and fennel, releasing their fragrance into the air like the sweetest bouquet you ever smelled. Everything in overlapping harmony, all leading around to the back porch.

The back porch was the real prize -- a giant wooden island extending off the house above the riotous bouquet. From the back porch, you could sit deep in the shade, lounging on padded Adirondack chairs, listening to the birds and wind chimes sing. Or crank up Gran's old Victrola, which Grandpa had brought back from Europe as a wedding present, and play Count Bassie, Benny Goodman, and Elle Fitzgerald. All

while drinking glass after glass of sweet tea Gran made by the bathtub full for evening gatherings. From the deck, you could look out across acres of corn laid out in endless, symmetrical rows. Or watch the sun go down over the scarecrow arguing silently with the dozen or so crows hanging around. Evenings on the back porch were the best. Everyone liked to dance and sing on the back porch. Or play board and card games. Or sit and talk about the day and life and the family and the weather and the news and the Farmer's Almanac. The back deck was where magical evenings lived.

I loved it at Updike Hollow any time of the day or night. And even remember asking Dad once when I was younger -- when they picked me up at the end of summer -- why we didn't just all move there. But all Dad only said in return was it was better for Mom to live in California. She'd burned certain bridges in Oklahoma and refused to make the necessary repairs. Whatever that meant. He told me he'd explain more when I got "older."

But today, I returned for the first time without Mom or Dad to stay longer than just a summer. Gran led the way inside, unlocking the front door, which I thought was strange, and called out, "We're home."

The inside of the house was beautiful too -- full of sunlight and rapturous with plant life everywhere -- pots of English ivy, monstera, maidenhair ferns lined shelves. Succulents thrived in the corners. And a wide variety of spices and herbs occupied just about every countertop and windowsill. It occurred to me, and not for the first time, that Gran's place was obviously why my mother liked being so close to nature.

"I changed your room to downstairs, Sugar," Gran said. "I closed off the upper two floors a few years ago, since it's just been me, and haven't been up there since. I thought you might want to be down here closer to where my room is. Even if the room isn't one of your choosing." Gran led me down a short hallway off the parlor to a room

at the east side of the house where, I noticed, for the first time, held the last of Gran's prisms hanging in the window. "With it being just me most of the time now, I've reduced my footprint, as they say. But now that you're here, if you like, we can open the top floors and get them tidied up if you like. Maybe throw a welcome home party. Or a sleepover. Your friends, Bethany and Jane, are still around. And I know they would love to see you."

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

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

I was about to reassure Gran that whatever room she'd picked would be perfect. But then I noticed her take an ancient skeleton key from her apron pocket, which she'd been using to lock and unlock all the doors, and unlock the door to my new room.

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

"No," she chuckled, her blue eyes twinkling, "Of course not. But sometimes locked doors are the best way to keep nosy spirits out. You can hear them creaking and moaning all about the upstairs well into the attic at night. Which happens when you have a house this big house with only one old lady living in it. The house settles and makes all kinds of ungodly noises. Especially during the winter months when ghosts can't help themselves from coming down to butt into your business."

"Ghosts, Gran? You sound like Mom."

"Well, there's probably some truth to that. My own Ma used to talk about the spirit world and all those lost souls trapped in the places between heaven and earth. She was gifted with the sight, you know. Why, when I was a little girl, my mother, your great-grandmother, held séances up in the attic. It was the Great Depression and times were lean so she charged customers people a nickel to attend. But my daddy put a stop to it

all. Said we'd be better off paying attention to the living, not the dead, no matter how much coin they brought. He didn't like..." Here Gran stopped and noticed my face, "Oh look at me babbling on. You look so tired from all your travels. And you must be hungry!"

"I sure am." And I was. I felt bone tired. Like I could fall asleep standing up. And it'd been days since I'd eaten anything but Pringles, or drank anything but Diet Coke. I was hungry for some real food and desperate to rest on a comfortable bed.

"Why don't you put your things away in the room, wash up and get settled. I'll start lunch."

Gran was right, the room was not what I'd have chosen. But it was light and airy, with a nice breeze coming in through the big open bay window that faced over the east garden. Bringing in smells of cypress trees and some kind of spicy herb, which I think was coriander, complementing the lavender ivy vines stretching across the windowsill. Dropping my bags, I looked around the room noticing how white the comforter covering the four poster frame bed had embroidered purple violets. And the large pillows covered in the same. With an antique vanity mirror, chifforobe, and more flowers staged around the room, completing the whole Victorian garden style motif. The entire house, in fact, felt like one giant, soothing Elizabethan garden cave.

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

"It's rude to stare, Mr. Crow," I said sitting up, rubbing my face, and stretching. For some reason, I thought of my mom when I said that, felt a shiver, and prayed she was okay. The crow squawked and flew away.

Gran must've heard me stirring cause, a moment later, she tapped on the door and called in, "Are you up, Sugar? You slept through lunch. It's dinner time now! You must be famished."

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

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

Gran's Kitchen at Grasslands

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

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

"No trouble at all, Sugar. It's nice to have someone to cook for again."

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

"It's a little strange having the doors locked. It kind of makes me feel trapped," I worried before a thought occurred to me. "Do you think that's what it feels like for Mom while she's locked up in the hospital?"

"Maybe. I guess. I never thought about it that way. Oh, I'm so sorry, Sugar! I'm an old fool and should've thought of that. I've become far too quirky in my old age. Your Grandad said if I didn't straighten up one day, I'd lose my head. And here I am doing just that."

"Do you miss him?"

"Who? Your Grandad? Sure do. We were together a very long time, since the war. I was only sixteen when we married and I hardly remember a time when it wasn't him and me. Plus, when your Grandad was around, every day was a party – which makes a difference. With just me, it feels like I'm just a ghost."

"I wish my Dad was still around."

"I know you do, Sugar. I'm so sorry. It's not fair."

After dinner, I helped Gran clean up the kitchen, still reeling from everything that had happened, but starting to come to terms with it. At the center of it all, as much as I loved my mother, I knew she wasn't going to get better...and that it had all been my fault.

"Gran, do you think Mom will get better?"

"I don't see why not," Gran answered. "She always has in the past."

"Yeah, but it's never been this bad before. And we always had my Dad when it did. She really went way out there this time -- into her other world. Dr. Singh, that's Mom's psychiatrist at the hospital, said her reality was broken and she was super delusional and that she should've been diagnosed with schizophrenia a long time ago and started on the right meds. She even gave me a pamphlet to read about how serious her mental break is."

“Ohh, them doctors in California don’t know everything, Sugar. That’s all just conjecture as far as I’m concerned.”

“She seemed pretty confident and specific.”

“Sugar, your Mom has some peccadillos to be sure. And they make her a little unusual. But that don’t make her any different from anyone else. Them doctors can be helpful. But sometimes, they aren’t. We just need to keep the faith your Mom will get back to herself again.”

“But what about her diagnosis. And her symptoms. And the medications the doctors prescribed for her to take. They helped her when she took them before. But then she got worse without them.”

“I know, Sugar.”

“Gran, what if Mom doesn’t get better this time? Do you think that’s possible? I’m afraid she won’t and that its all my fault.”

“It’s not your fault, Sugar. Don’t think that. It has nothing to do with you.”

“I’m not so sure. Gran, can I tell you something and you promise not to tell Mom or Dr. Singh or anyone?”

“Of course. You can tell me anything.”

“No, please promise.”

“I promise. I love you, Sugar. What is it?”

“I took all of Mom’s medications away and hid them last year. Right after Dad died and we had the funeral. She didn’t stop taking them. I took them away and hid them. I was upset over Dad and she wasn’t paying attention. I think I made her get sick all over again.”

"No, Sugar? Even if you did take the meds away, it's not your fault."

"I don't know. After Dad died, I was angry with her. And then she sent you away. It wasn't fair. She's my mother and all, but she took my Dad away. Not the other way around. I wanted her to get sick so they'd send her back to the hospital and then I could come live with you again. I didn't want to live with her. But I didn't know Mom would get that sick without her medications. I thought I could just get her off her meds long enough till I could move home with you. And then, when she got better, she could come join us. But I wasn't trying to hurt her. I was just mad. And I swear, I didn't know everything would get so screwed up. Oh Gran, I'm so sorry."

I finally said the words I'd been holding in for a long time. Since more than seven months ago. That I had a guilty secret. I started crying.

"Oh, Sugar," Gran replied rushing over to hug me. To hold me. "It's okay. Shh, it's alright. You didn't do anything wrong."

"But I did."

"Suki, you're still a little girl. I know you're almost sixteen now, but you've had far too many burdens for a girl your age. And no one thinks straight after a loved one dies. I wish I'd known how hard a time you were having. I would've been more insistent about taking you home no matter what your Mom said. I feel like I've let you down."

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

"I understand."

"I don't hate her. Really. She's still my mom. And even if I forgive her for what she did to my Dad, I don't want to be there anymore. Can I stay here? With you? Till I'm old enough to choose for myself? Even if Mom gets better?"

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

"You promise!"

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

"Thank you, Gran, thank you. That makes me feel better. I love you, Gran."

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

"Okay, Gran. That sounds nice."

When Gran left to retrieve the phone from the living room, unlocking the doors between, I pulled out a bottle of my mom's pills from my pocket -- the ones I'd been saving for a long time -- and dissolved one into Gran's milk glass. Phase one was complete. Mom had been locked away with no immediate ending in sight and I'd been sent to live with Gran in Oklahoma. Now, if I timed the next phase right, in just about two years, Gran's "dementia" would progress to a dangerous level that would require a care facility. That's when I'd have her lawyer, who'd see me as the only legally viable next of kin, certify Gran to a care facility and make me the guardian of Updike Hollow. By then I would be eighteen, emancipated, and no one could control my destiny. I'll be

ready to come into my full manifestation – that I have magic greater than anyone suspected. I could live at Updike Hollow for the rest of my life and no one could force me to leave or tell me otherwise. Then, like my great-grandmother before me, I would return the place to its former glory. Develop my own coven, advertise, and deliver Updike Hollow back to being the spiritual center of the local universe -- entertaining both the living and the dead for a few coin. Then I'd be happy.

I just wish Dad could be here to enjoy it. Maybe he will once I reach out to him on the other side.

The End.