

The Crone's Odyssey

Movement behind me reflected in a storefront window captured my attention as I perused antique pieces displayed there. Mesmerized, I watched as a gnarled, age-spotted hand protruding from a worn coat sleeve clutched my wrist in a firm yet strangely comforting grasp.

I turned. Luminous green eyes roamed over my features. Searching. Analyzing. Seemingly satisfied, the old woman with white hair, the texture of cotton candy, gave a perfunctory nod. A serene smile transformed the divots of time stippled across her face and nestled into folds and dimpled contours. Her powerful touch penetrated my psyche and conveyed a peculiar sense of knowing. Oddly, baffling emotions swept over me, invading my mind and body at a blinding speed as if a computer were downloading bits of data.

Then her other arthritic hand rose slowly and lightly stroked my face, wiping away tears I didn't know were there. Her gentle caress comforted me on a day I so desperately needed solace. It was the first anniversary of my mother's death. Divorced, childless, and orphaned—I was alone.

My sight blurred and surroundings faded as an image, seemingly from the past, emerged. *A green-eyed toddler with a halo of red curls sat on a braided rug. A puppy romped enthusiastically around her, darting carelessly at her face, and nudging his wet nose into her neck as she giggled with delight.* A frantic voice infiltrated the scene, ending the vision.

“Grandma!”

A pretty teen, dressed in ripped jeans, motorcycle boots, and a black leather jacket approached. When she noticed her grandmother gripping my arm, her lips flattened into a tight line. Eyes averted, obviously embarrassed, she reached for the crone's hand.

“Grandma, don't be bothering strangers.”

The old woman's gaze lingered on me. Her frail veneer ensured that I did not fear her.

“She's not bothering me. We're getting acquainted. May I see her again?” The awkward suggestion surprised me as much as it did the girl.

“I... I, uh...” She stuttered.

“I live nearby. I could spend time with her occasionally if she would like that.

The old woman nodded.

Placing my hand lightly over her time-etched one, I asked, “What is your name? An image of a delicate rose flashed in my mind.

“Her name is Rose. She can't talk.”

Nonplussed, I responded hesitantly. “Rose... my name is Janet.”

Then another vision appeared. *A white clapboard house with a mailbox at the curb. The box stood open exposing an envelope inside on which an address was clearly visible.* The vivid scene should have jolted me, but it did not.

Rose smiled knowingly and wordlessly conveyed, “*My granddaughter doesn't understand, but you do.*”

Confused, I nodded and shifted my eyes to Rose's granddaughter. “And you are?”

Tilting her head, obviously assessing me, she answered. “My name is Zoey. Why do you want to spend time with my grandmother?”

"My mother passed recently, and I find myself at loose ends. Rose reminds me of her."

"I don't know. My mom would probably freakout."

I withdrew a card and handed it to Zoey. "This is my contact information. Please have your mother call me."

To Rose I gave a wink and patted her hand. She loosened her grip. "I hope to see you soon."

Zoey and her grandmother shuffled away. Rose checked over her shoulder giving me one last look. I was left feeling as though I'd had an *aha* moment. It seemed as though I had solved a mystery, which was bewildering. I understood nothing about what had just happened. However, I did have the presence of mind to scribble down the address from the envelope in my vision.

The next two weeks passed at a crawl with no word from Zoey's mom. Thoughts of Rose pelted my brain. I contemplated the slip of paper on which the address was scrawled. Would it be intrusive to go to the house? What would I say? How could I explain knowing where Rose lived? Then I laughed at myself. *You don't even know if she lives at this address.*

Deciding it wasn't intrusive for me to take a stroll on a beautiful day, I further justified my actions. *If the address happens to be Rose's home, and by chance I see her, it would just be a coincidence, right?*

An app on my phone revealed the destination just four blocks away. The sunshine called to me as if it were a siren tempting a lost sailor. Casting my doubts aside, I followed the blinking arrow of the app.

A slight breeze stirred my hair and a songbird's notes quivered from a nearby tree. The intoxicating beauty of that day enticed me on an odyssey from which there would be no return.

I spotted my destination down the block. It was indeed the house and mailbox of my vision. Rose stood beside the mailbox as if anticipating my visit and lifted her hand in a silent greeting.

The woman beside Rose followed her line of sight. As I neared, the woman's expression changed from mere curiosity to confused wonder. She glanced at Rose then back at me.

Rose smiled serenely and held out her hand.

I pocketed my phone and took the proffered hand. "Hello, Rose. What a pleasant surprise."

Her companion continued to scrutinize me—obviously dumbfounded.

Hoping to ease the woman's tension, I greeted her. "Hi, my name is Janet. I met Rose a couple of weeks ago while shopping. Zoey was with her."

"Oh, yes. Zoey told me. She is my daughter and Rose's great-granddaughter. How did you find us?"

"I live nearby and was out for a stroll. I like to challenge the mistress of aging by walking," I quipped.

Something lurked behind the woman's eyes. A secret?

Rose gave my arm a slight tug and the woman noticed. "It seems Grandma would like for you to join us. My name is Cali. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"That would be nice."

The three of us sat at the kitchen table. A hint of cinnamon and maple syrup lingered in the air. An awkward silence engulfed the room until Billy Idol's song *Mony Mony* blasted from Cali's phone, startling all of us. "Excuse me, I need to take this."

She walked to the dining room, but I could hear snippets of her side of the conversation.

“She’s here.... I don’t know.... She has brown eyes....”

I’m here. I have brown eyes.

Rose touched my hand which induced another vision, one which transported me to a vintage-looking room. *A teen sat in a rocking chair. Adoration emanated from her as she gazed at a swaddled bundle. She pulled the swaddling away from the newborn’s face and a pair of fawn-brown eyes peered out.*

It was as if I stood behind the teen looking over her shoulder at those remarkably familiar eyes. *What is happening to me?*

Cali’s voice penetrated the vision. “My mother would like to speak to you. Her name is Mona.”

My heart stuttered in its rhythm then beat wildly as I took the phone. “Hello.”

“Is this Janet?”

“Yes.”

“We need to meet.”

“Sure. Now?”

“No. And please leave my mother’s home. I’ll call you in a day or two and set something up.”

“I’m sorry. Have I upset you?”

“I’ll explain when we meet. I...just give me a little time, please.”

The call disconnected. Perplexed, I handed the phone to Cali.

“Rose, I’m sorry, I have to leave. I hope to see you soon.”

She nodded her understanding. Then her attention drifted, and her eyes stared blankly.

Memories jabbed at the periphery of my consciousness, just out of reach, while I awaited Mona's call. It took two days.

"Hello?"

"Janet, this is Mona. Can you meet me at the coffee shop on fifteenth Street tomorrow morning at 8:30?"

"Yes, but what's this about?"

"I promise, I'll explain tomorrow."

The call ended before I could respond.

I arrived at the coffee shop early. To settle my stomach, I placed a delicate morsel of orange scone in my mouth before drinking coffee. A woman entered and placed her order. I was struck by a puzzling sense of familiarity. When she turned from the counter with her coffee, I was stunned. It was as though I were looking in a mirror except instead of seeing my straight brunette hair and dark eyes I was greeted with curly red hair and green eyes. In spite of the difference in coloring, the likeness was uncanny. More so because I had never resembled anyone, not even my parents.

As if drawn by my gaze, the woman looked in my direction. A startled expression crossed her face as her hand swept to her heart.

"Janet?"

"Yes. Mona?"

She joined me at the table. Seated across from one another we were at a loss for words. I finally broke the silence.

“What is this about?”

“Janet...I believe we are sisters.”

Astounded, I was speechless.

Mona continued. “Mom—Rose—has dementia. Before she lost her ability to speak, she was in the hospital with a high fever, and she kept asking for her brown-eyed baby. Even after the fever subsided, she kept asking. She was so insistent that the doctor questioned me about it. I told him I was an only child. He said Mom was so adamant he wondered if she had given a child up for adoption. I told him no way. I couldn't imagine my mother giving a child away or having one out of wedlock. You see Mom was only nineteen when she had me.”

I sat silently trying to absorb the enormity of what Mona had told me. *Why didn't I look like my parents?*

Then a memory unfolded. *As a child of eight, I was having an imaginary tea party. I needed one more doll to complete the place setting. I knew there was a porcelain doll in a cedar chest in my parents' room. Rummaging through the chest, searching for it, I removed a cigar box and was reaching for the doll when my mother yelled at me from the doorway. “What are you doing!”*

The tone of her voice frightened me. My mother had never yelled at me. She was always calm and loving. I cried and told her, “I need another doll for my tea party.”

She gathered me in her arms. “I'm sorry sweetheart. Let's find a different doll that is more suitable for your tea party.” Deftly replacing the cigar box, she shut the lid.

Mona watched me. “What is it? Do you know something?”

“No. I'm an only child, too, and Adoption was never mentioned. Why do you think we're sisters?”

“Ever since the doctor mentioned the possibility of mom having another child, I’ve wondered. Cali and I theorized about what could have happened. When Zoey gave Cali your card and told her how Mom reacted to you, I thought it might be true. And now that I see our striking resemblance....”

“Why didn’t you call me sooner?”

“I should have. Hopefully, you can understand. I wasn’t ready to deal with the loss. You see, until Zoey told us about you, I could ignore the possibility of a sibling. If you are Mom’s child, then I am no longer the first born, the only child, or the only daughter.

“What changed your mind?”

“I looked at a picture of my two daughters and wondered how I’d feel if I had to give one up—if my girls didn’t get to grow up together or know of each other’s existence. Then I realized I was being selfish and that I wouldn’t be losing anything. I’d be gaining a sister.”

“Mona. I’d like you to come back to my house. Some of my mother’s—perhaps *adoptive* mother’s—things are there. If there’s a clue to this mystery, I want you to be with me when I find it.”

Together, we stood before the scarred cedar chest. I told Mona my memory of the tea party. Dropping to my knees, I lifted the lid. The faint scent of cedar welcomed me. I excavated various forgotten items including the porcelain doll, until I reached the bottom of the chest. Tucked in the back corner, an old cigar box awaited. I held my breath and hesitated. Mona lowered herself to the floor beside me and slid her arm around my waist. An air of expectation and a sense of knowing passed between us as we regarded the box.

I sat the box on the floor in front of us. Thumbing the lid slightly open, I hesitated and glanced at Mona. She nodded her encouragement. Folding the lid back revealed a black and white photo of a teenage Rose posed with a dark-haired soldier and an envelope addressed to *Baby Brown Eyes*. My hands shook as I removed a yellowed sheet of paper—dimpled from dried tears.

Baby Brown Eyes, they won't let me name you. They said it would make it more painful if I did. Only, I don't know how anything can be more painful. I've already lost so much.

Please know that you were conceived in love. It is with love that I bestow you to your new family, a family that can give you a mother, a father, and a life I can only dream of for you.

They won't tell me with whom or where you will be. I hope one day I will see you again. I will carry you in my heart until we meet again. I love you, my Brown-Eyed Girl.

Mona opened her arms, and we embraced. We cried for what we had missed and for the joy of what we had found. It occurred to me that this odyssey I was traversing was not my own, it belonged to Rose. Mona and I were merely passengers.

Blocks away, we sat across the kitchen table from Rose. A vacant expression eclipsed her features.

Mona wrapped her arm around my shoulders. "I'm sorry. She has good days and bad ones—maybe tomorrow..."

We were so close, yet Rose was locked within her deteriorating mind. Devastated, I took a shuddering breath and whispered her name. "Rose?" Then more urgently, "Mama, it's me, your Brown-Eyed girl."

Her eyes cleared, and she reached for me. I circled the table and bent into my mother's embrace. I was not alone.