

Grandma Tull's Stories
by
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Chapter 22

Then the summer day came when Rosie woke and thought, "Today's the day." She hadn't told Lee because she knew he would worry, or want to come, and this was something she wanted to do by herself. She dressed in old jeans and boots, taking Lee's jeep because the roads might be bad. They were bad too; folks had quit coming this way long ago. She found the road more by instinct than by directions, drove it as far as it went, and then walked through the woods and across the now overgrown meadow thick with bushes and long grasses. The swampland was there, as she had known it would be, smaller now but still impressive enough. It overwhelmed her a little, the size and dark intensity of it. The dark water was inhabited with wildlife; she could hear the faraway call of birds, the drone of flying insects, the whine of dragonflies, and, occasionally, a small splash.

"How far does it go back? She wondered. This had never occurred to her before on hearing the stories, but standing here, she knew it stretched back a far greater distance than she had envisioned. As she stood trying to take it all in, she noticed that here, near the bank where she was and in the dark, still water surrounding the black tree, a strange eerie silence lay over the swamp.

"Maybe he eats everything that comes near him." This thought came with such sudden clarity she knew it to be true.

"He's feeding again, and after animal blood will come human blood. He'll drain the swamp and then come onto land, and he will

come out hunting. The small, terrible, persistent voice inside her head rang with the voice of truth, and she felt a shudder go through her.

It surprised her, despite the stories, her first view of the black tree. She had known it would be here, had anticipated it, but some part of her, the part still believing in heroes and Santa Clause and the power of fairy dust, hoped it was just another story, a tall tale of the land. Strange and alien it rose from the dark water, twisting black against the blue sky. She felt its power right away, a pulling force drawing the eye to it, a charismatic magnetism already working its spell on her. She could feel it mesmerizing her even as she studied it. The three small trees were harder to spot, and then she had them. One was to the left of the black tree; she was shocked to see it was already half as tall as the parent. The other two were smaller, thinner, growing closer to the bank. She stood for a long time at the edge of the black water testing the feel of the place. Yes, it was still here, the ancient evil, undiminished by time or the dwindling swamp, perhaps more concentrated due to these things.

She looked around for the owl, but he was nowhere to be seen.

“Get going Rosie; you’re taking too long,” she told herself and got moving.

Being careful not to spill any of the dank water on herself, she dipped a jar into the black water. After tightening the lid, she slid the jar into a large, plastic bag and zipped the top. With one last, long look at the trees, she retraced her steps back to the jeep and drove home.

Once back at the cottage, she placed the jar on the kitchen counter with a thick stack of newspapers underneath, and went upstairs to Grandma Tull’s closet. Carefully carrying Musha’s basket, she reentered the kitchen and stopped in her tracks.

“Don’t touch that,” she said sharply.

Lee, in the act of picking up the plastic bag with the jar inside, stopped with his hand in midair.

“What it is?” He eyed the jar of black water suspiciously.

She didn’t answer immediately but came into the kitchen slowly,

holding the basket. She placed it on the counter, and his look went from the basket to the jar and then back again.

His eyes narrowed. "Rosie," he said quietly.

He knew the stories, had heard bits and pieces from listening to Grandma Tull and from the gossip of the land. "Is this from the swamp?"

She nodded. "I wanted to try something. It might not work, but..." She shrugged.

"Why Rosie?"

"Because I have to stop it, I have to stop it before it gets too powerful, before the little trees are grown. I have to do it right now, while everything is fresh, before I have babies and get caught up in life and the dust of time settles over it all. By that time, I'll have forgotten, and life will seem normal and safe, but it won't be. It will never be, because one day the little trees will be grown, and then he'll take their power. Don't you see that? He's feeding again. He'll take their power and use it, and he'll come out hunting. He'll come hunting, and there will be no stopping him then."

At her words, Lee's face drained of color. Reaching out, he took her hand.

"Rosie, this is dangerous. I don't understand it all, but I know it's dangerous. I've heard the stories, about the white witch, and you can't do that, Rosie. You can't do that."

"No, I'm not going to do that! I just wanted to put some of Musha's herbs in the water and see what happens. If I can change the water, maybe then..." again she shrugged.

He got it, of course. He was, after all, a man who understood living, growing things and how the environment could be changed by them.

"Will it work?" he asked.

She shook her head uncertainly. "I don't know."

Opening the basket, she set out all of the contents except Grandma Tull's flowers. These she crumbled mixing the flower bits in with the thick layer of mystery herbs that had fallen apart long ago, forming a

thick layer in the bottom of the basket. She reached for the plastic bag holding the water, but Lee took it from her.

"Let me," he said.

Unzipping the bag, he lifted out the glass jar.

"Be careful," she warned, frowning and biting her lip.

He gave her a reassuring look and reached for a towel. Carefully he unscrewed and lifted the lid. A thick, foul odor rolled from the jar, quickly pervading the small kitchen. Lee gagged and, for a second, Rosie thought he would drop the jar. Grabbing the lid, she slammed it back into place and ran to slide open the screen door. Lee managed to set the jar down on the newspaper before fleeing the kitchen. As he had taken the brunt of the smell, Rosie quickly recovered in the fresh air and went back in to turn on the overhead ceiling fan and open the windows.

She turned to see Lee hanging in the doorway, his eyes red, his face ashen. "God, what a smell. Did it smell like that when you put it in the jar?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't think so."

"Now what do we do?" he questioned. He was recovering, color coming back to his cheeks. Yet, he eyed the jar doubtfully.

"We put Musha's herbs in it."

Holding his breath, Lee raised the lid while Rosie quickly sprinkled a pinch of the dried mixture from the basket into the water. Replacing the lid, they watched and waited. The particles floated on top for a few seconds and then sank.

"Now what?" Lee wanted to know.

"We leave it and wait. It may take time."

Lee frowned and peered down into the basket. "So what's in this stuff anyway?"

Rosie smiled, "Hopefully Musha magic."

After two days, the water didn't smell, and after a week, it turned a muddy brown.

"Well, it did something," Lee commented.

"I don't know." Rosie said, shaking her head. "Something is still

not right; I'm forgetting something."

She was staring at the jar of water with a faraway look, and her voice had a strange, distant quality. Lee was reminded of the day she reached for Eugene Tull's knife, and it scared him.

"Ok. Enough with the jar. Let's go swimming, shall we."

He pulled her away then, but she was beginning to act strangely. The dreams, that was one of the disquieting things; the sleepwalking was another. He started staying with her at night afraid of what might happen, of what she might do. He went to talk with Tan to tell of his concerns, to ask for advice, to find out what Tan knew. They had a long talk with Tan filling in the missing pieces of the story, the parts Lee had not gleaned from the legends or from the fragments he had heard of Grandma Tull's stories. After that, more worried than ever, Lee went to speak with his grandfather who was wise and perceptive and had a magic of his own.

Weeks passed while he watched her carefully and waited. He went to the swamp to stand in the meadow and stare through binoculars at the black tree and the bleak water and the owl perched in the branches. He sniffed the air, felt the wind and, closing his eyes, let the feel of the place wash over him and into him until he understood the enemy he faced. He came home to find Rosie on her knees in the sunroom behind one of the potted plants. Going to her quickly, he knelt beside her.

"Look," she said. She held out her hand, and there, in her palm, was a large, golden butterfly; trapped in the room, it had fallen behind the plant. Covering her hands were tiny glittery-gold particles shed from its wings. She looked up at him smiling, her eyes large and sparkling. For a second he was struck with such a sense of *déjà vu* it made him dizzy.

"Fairy dust," she said. Carrying the butterfly, she headed for the kitchen, and concerned about her intentions, he followed. She laid the butterfly down carefully, and when he unscrewing the lid to the jar, she brushed the small specks from her hand into the muddy water. For seconds only they floated, shimmering gold, on the top of the

water and then sank to disappear below the surface.

“The Fairies never reached Troll Mountain, Lee. They never covered it with Fairy dust. That’s what we needed, Fairy dust!” Reaching for Musha’s basket, Rosie carefully placed the golden butterfly inside.

“Rosie, it’s only one butterfly. We can’t go out capturing and killing butterflies.” Lee was skeptical.

“Maybe it’s enough to start the change, to weaken him.” She was biting her lip again.

“And then what?” he inquire suspiciously.

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I’m not a witch, or even a healer like Musha. I’m just trying to figure things out as I go. Maybe it will be enough.”

He pulled her to him, holding her gently. “I’m worried Rosie; I don’t want to lose you. I’ve been to the swamp and have felt his power. He’s dangerous, very dangerous.”

At her look, he smiled. “I have my ways too. Remember, I come from a long ancestry of battling evil. My people fought wrong long before your nation was formed.”