

## Some Birds Fly North for Winter

By Aric Sundquist

Alex Winter watched the woman he was supposed to call grandma. He watched with plastic binoculars that didn't work too well. The focus knob had grains of sand that snapped between the gears, so it couldn't twist all that far, and everything looked clouded through the lenses. The binoculars were part of a whole NYPD cop set, complete with plastic revolver, gold badge, and handcuffs made of actual metal, key and all.

From his tree fort, he watched his grandma through the window of the upstairs guest room. She rocked back and forth and stabbed her quilt with long knitting needles. Her hands worked far quicker than he would have thought possible for a woman in her eighties. Her hands were large and wrinkled and spotted with rust.

Alex looked at his own hands, young and smooth and with Little Debbie frosting under his fingernails. He had stolen the treat from the cupboard when his mom was vacuuming, then ran up into his fort so he could snack in peace and keep an eye out on things. It wasn't something an officer of the law would do, he realized, so he decided to change the word "steal" to "borrow." It sounded better. Besides, the stakeout was a full-time job. Cops had donuts. He had Little Debbies.

He licked the sugar from his fingers, frosting all warm on his tongue, and thought about abandoning his post to go grab another, but decided against it. He had already borrowed three. His mother might notice an entire box missing. So he sat and watched his grandma, waiting for her to conduct any malicious activity.

Alex had the gold badge on his shirt pocket and pistol wedged in his belt, loaded with water he had blessed himself from a Bible that a mean Christian had given to him outside the mall bookstore. The man had told him he was now old enough to go to Hell, so he was old enough to read this here book. Alex took the book and threw it in his closet, not knowing that come the following summer, he would desperately need it.

He watched her hands move with needle-flash speed, the oxygen mask secured around her face. Usually, she only used it when she went for walks. She must have had problems breathing today. Suddenly, her face twisted all up. Her lips curled back in a snarl, teeth stained yellow from years of black coffee and cigarettes. She ripped off the mask and clutched at her throat, gasping for air.

Alex thought she was having a heart attack. At least he hoped. Then she burst out laughing and slapped her knee and regarded Alex with dead eyes that looked like shark eyes—the way they roll back when they attack. The directness of her stare caused goose bumps to engulf his arms.

They stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity—ocean eyes meeting bleached eyes—until she finally turned away and went back to her knitting. A little smile played at the edges of her mouth.

Alex was holding his breath. He let it out in a loud wheeze, then pulled out his water pistol from his belt. He put his grandmother's withered face into the sights and feigned pulling the trigger.

Accidents happen all the time, he thought. Especially to old people.

#

When Alex found out his grandmother Roberta (or "Bird" as his dad called her) was coming to live with them, he was out of his mind with excitement. He finally had somebody to play with. He decided their first afternoon would consist of a best-out-of-three marathon of checkers and then *Uno* and finally end with a walk around the block while the autumn leaves danced along the streets. The weather was pretty this time of year, and he thought the fresh air would be a nice treat for her. He told his mother his plan, but she made him promise not to bother grandma too much, because she was old and needed plenty of rest. Alex felt a little saddened by this, but gave his promise and ran upstairs to sort through his games anyway, because it never hurt to be prepared.

The last time Alex saw his grandmother was at the Holbrook Nursing Home, over a year ago. She had been there for the past six months. Her sight was diminishing and she couldn't remember Alex's name. She kept calling him Robby. After correcting her a dozen times, he finally threw his hands in the air and collapsed on the floor in defeat. She just wasn't listening. Then his mother took him to the side and told him it was because dad's name was Robert, and grandma called him Robby growing up, and she was just getting a little confused. This upset Alex; he didn't want to see her confused. But he also wanted her to call him by his right name.

Then a year flew by.

During this time, Alex put some length on his bones, was attacked by three squirrels, and began taking medication just to “slow him down a little.” The whole time he waited for the impending news about his grandmother. But to everyone’s surprise, she got better, and would be coming to stay with them.

Alex helped his mother make up a nice place for his grandmother to stay in upstairs. He was excited for her to visit, even though she was old and couldn’t chase him around the yard like a T-Rex. His dad did that. Alex would laugh and fall down and play dead and then get back up and kick him in the shins and climb a tree and lob pinecone grenades down in a furious assault. (Coincidentally, that's also where the squirrel attack started.) But even if his grandmother couldn't chase him around, it would still be great to have her in the house, because she laughed a lot, and liked to cook a lot—even when nobody was hungry.

Then she arrived and stepped out of the taxicab.

For starters, her skin was on all wrong. It hung in clumps like raw cookie dough and looked funny. Over the next week, Alex would determine that when a monster slipped into the body of your grandmother, it should make sure to resemble her at least a little bit. Not like this thing rolling out of the back seat, all blubbery and weird looking.

She glanced over at him sitting on his tree swing and said, “Go tell your father I’m here.” It didn’t seem strange at the time, until Alex stormed inside the house and told his father the news and trudged back outside (marveling at how a blueberry muffin appeared in his hand) and got a good look at her eyes and noticed they were dead.

He dropped the muffin on the ground.

“Don’t drop muffins, Robby,” she said. “I never had a muffin growing up in that swamp down south. Now pick that up and help me get my things.”

Alex was about to ask her how she knew about the dropped muffin, since she was obviously blind as a bat, but a slight tilting of her head caused him to shut up. She seemed like a dog hearing a noise far off in the distance. Or maybe she was listening for the question he was about to ask. Regardless, he picked up the muffin, put it in his jacket pocket, and helped her with one of her small suitcases. He led her up to her new room.

Once he opened the door, he forgot how scary she was acting and ran into the bedroom and wrenched open all the curtains. He was proud of their renovation—of all the painting and rearranging and all the new pillows. Grandmas liked pillows. The room was nice and cozy and smelled like fresh lilacs and he wanted to hang out in there, too.

“See,” he said, motioning to the window. “You can watch the sun rise in the morning!”

“Don’t care for sunrises,” she said.

“Really?”

“Too warm on my skin. I like when the sun sets, when it gets cold and dark.” She took a long tug from her oxygen and stared toward him with white eyes. For some reason she reminded him of the smoking caterpillar from *Alice in Wonderland*.

It wasn't until later that night, slipping into his covers and waiting for sleep to take hold, when he realized his grandmother had never asked for a hug.

#

A week later Alex found his grandmother's teeth. They were just sitting there in a glass of water on the kitchen sink. Now, if she really wanted to fool everyone into thinking she was his real grandma, then she should be careful about where she hid her costume. This was getting silly. He had a brand new set of vampire teeth for his Halloween costume, and he didn't keep those out in

the open. Then he wondered what else was part of her costume. Since his parents were out grocery shopping, it would be the perfect time to find out.

He tiptoed upstairs and listened at her door. Not a sound. Suddenly he tripped and was in her room. He hadn't been inside in over a week. It smelled like musty clothes and old lady perfume. There was another smell, too, a strong chemical smell like when a barbecue catches fire and all the food burns to a crisp. Within moments, he pinpointed the smell to her closet. He creaked open the door and flicked on the drawstring light. Then he gasped at what he saw.

Decapitated heads.

They were molded out of plastic and each held a wig. He never met anyone with a wig collection. It must be the second part of her disguise. Alex had a fake wig for his Dracula costume, an itchy black thing with a V-shaped widow's peak. She must have been doing this for a long time to accumulate so many costumes.

That got him thinking. The final part of his Dracula outfit was a black cloak. That part sealed the deal and struck fear into all those who saw it. He just had to find the final part of her costume, that's all, and then he could expose her as a fake.

He moved aside some of her dresses and came across her knitting supplies next to a metal basket that looked like a cauldron, except it had a plug for an electrical outlet. Her suitcase sat next to it as well, the one he helped carry the day she arrived. He set the case down on the floor and threw open the lid.

Inside was a book called *The Resurrection of the Flesh*. The illustrations were a little weird, with demons and rituals and other spooky things, but overall the book was kind of neat. He wished he had more time to read it. There was also a photo album with pictures dating back

to the 1800's, each depicting a woman in her late teens. The last photo was in color and he recognized the woman as his mother.

Next he handled various glass tubes that seemed like spice bottles. Each one was labeled differently: *Tongue of Bat*, *Toadstool Spores*, *Wormwood Resin*.

It was then he realized they weren't spices at all, but spell components! There was no eye of newt though. That was supposed to be like table salt for witches.

The last thing he found was a locket of brown hair next to a pair of scissors. A memory came to him then, from yesterday morning. He was pouring milk into his stupid non-sugar cereal when he heard a loud SNIP and turned to see his grandmother whistling and hiding something behind her back. When he asked what she had there behind her robe, she replied that it was nothing but a little experiment and he shouldn't worry. Then she mumbled something about a change of plans and asked if he could help her program the TV.

Now Alex knew what was going on. His mother was the target for some crazy voodoo witch spell, but now his grandma was coming after him. There was no way she would use him for any spell.

Alex decided to mess with his grandmother.

He took up the scissors and inspected the wigs. Finding a good match, he cut off a chunk and replaced it with the hair his grandmother had snipped off. He was just about to try on a wig that shot in every direction like a confused spider web, when he heard a sound from the upstairs bathroom.

Alex's heart kicked in his chest. He was taking too long. He creaked the closet door shut and began putting everything back the way he had found it. Just as he sealed up her case and

tucked it back by her knitting supplies, he heard footsteps sliding across the carpeting outside, followed by his grandmother's familiar wheezing.

"Robby?" she asked. "Are you in here?"

He clicked off the closet light and slid up to the doorway. Through a crack in the door, he could vaguely see her standing in the center of the room. She tilted her head and sniffed the air as if she were a wolf tracking its prey. Then she took another few steps and was at the closet door.

The handle jiggled.

Alex retreated back from the door. He crouched behind her cauldron, which he now realized was the source of the strange odor. Knitting yarn spilled across the floor in dark entrails. Then he was holding one of her throw rugs in front of him like a shield.

The door swung open and light was everywhere. He peeked around the side of the rug and saw his grandmother towering in the doorway.

"Now Robby," she said, "it's not nice to hide on people. Come out and give your grandma a hug."

She had never asked for a hug. Not in the eight days since she arrived. It was just a trick to get him out of hiding and he wouldn't fall for it.

She crouched down low, searching through the dark with her mind powers, hobbling closer and closer in increments and resembling a large inchworm. She came within a foot of him and stretched her neck out and smiled with those yellow teeth, her labored breath reeking like sour milk.

"I found you," she said, and then her hand clamped onto his foot, pulling him out and into the light. He screamed and kicked and fought against it, but she was too strong.

Then Alex's hand gripped something sharp.

A knitting needle.

He lashed out and punctured her hand. The attack wasn't deep, but she did cry out in surprise and rolled out of the way, dislodging an entire shelf off the wall.

Severed heads rained down everywhere.

Now was his chance. He ran, quickly. But just as he darted past her stubby little witch feet, something hit his eyes, making them itch like mad. He made it halfway across the room before everything began to shift and transform. Straight angles became curved angles and the world breathed as if he swam underwater. He couldn't move a muscle if he tried.

"Eye of newt," his grandmother said. She placed the spell component back in her pocket and loomed over him. "A witch of the dark arts never leaves home without it."

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"That's not what the picture showed in your book," Alex said, craning his neck to get a glimpse of her invocation circle. His hands and feet were bound with knitting yarn and a gag hung around his neck, now useless. He was still groggy from the powder. A kaleidoscope of colors danced at the corners of his vision, but it was passing quickly.

"Will you be quiet, Robby!" his grandma shouted. She scooped up oil from inside the cauldron and traced along the edges of the circle. "I've done this many times. I know what I'm doing."

"Yeah, but you're not tracing along the lines. You should have done this before you went blind."

"I can see well enough, child. Just so you know, I did this spell exactly one year ago to your grandmother. She was my roommate at that smelly clinic. Unfortunately, she was the only one I could get alone for long enough."

“You switched bodies with my real grandma?” Alex asked.

“Yes.”

“Is she still alive?”

“She died shortly after the spell was completed. My body was much younger, but riddled with cancer, and I needed to switch with the utmost of haste.” Her eerie laughter filled the room.

“Your grandmother suffered greatly in the end, I’m afraid.”

Alex’s shoulders sagged. He felt a tear run down his cheek. He had only met his grandma a handful of times, considering they lived so far away, but he loved her dearly. “I knew you weren’t her,” he said after some time. “She was nice and laughed all the time and liked going for walks. Not like you. You’re mean and you sit around too much.”

“That’s all very nice,” she said. “Now hush! I need to concentrate. Summoning Malphas is the trickiest part of the invocation. They don’t call him The Deceiver for nothing. I must proceed with the utmost of caution.”

“Who is Malphas?”

“An ancient demon.”

“Why do you have to summon a demon?”

“Because you need to ask permission to use the dark arts.”

“Why do you need permission?”

“That’s just how it works.”

“So if I wanted a puppy,” he contemplated, “I would have to summon Malphas first, and ask him if it’s okay.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because summoning puppies isn’t part of the black arts. You have to ask for something you can't normally buy.”

“Oh! So if I wanted a saber-tooth tiger, or a dinosaur egg?”

She rubbed her temples in agony.

“What about good witches?” he asked. “How do they get stuff?”

“I have work to finish, child. Please be quiet.”

Alex snapped his mouth shut and concentrated on his daring Houdini escape. It would happen in T-minus two minutes.

After she finished tracing the lines with the oil, she opened the window and chanted in a strange language. The circle began to glow like hot coals. She hobbled back and sat down with a grunt and threw more spell components inside her cauldron, mixing them up good. When everything brewed perfectly, she ladled out the contents into a silver chalice and pushed it out into the center of the circle.

The water in the chalice began to ripple. Chaotic energy surged through the room, like when the air hangs heavy with electricity right before a thunderstorm. Outside, dark clouds slipped across the sky and the sound of a thousand flapping wings rose with the wind.

*Who summons me?* a voice from the chalice commanded.

“Your faithful servant,” she answered. “Elizabeth Anne Colton.”

*Ah, my little southern belle. What is your wish?*

“I wish to transfer bodies with this child, my lord. I desire youth again!”

*The stars are right. Your faith is true. You may proceed with the ritual.*

She lit the locket of Alex’s hair with a candle, placed the remains on a small altar. The hair went up in black fumes.

By this time, Alex was folding up his pocket knife and hiding the remains of the rope underneath a nearby chair. He had also switched around three of her spell components. Now he leaned forward and watched everything with huge, bulging eyes.

And then the demon spoke: *Is this a joke, Elizabeth?*

“What do you mean?” she said.

*You are using jasmine for a soul transference ritual. Are you planning on seducing this child? That’s just wrong.*

“Jasmine?” she said, shocked. She picked up her components and smelled them. “How did that happen?”

*Do you wish to trade bodies with a human vessel?*

“Yes, of course.”

*From the sample you gave, it seems you would rather trade bodies with a horse in Colorado.*

She went speechless.

Now was Alex’s chance. “And she got the diagram wrong, too. It’s supposed to have two dashes in the center, not just one. And it’s supposed to have the letter M, for Malphas, not a W. Are there any demon names that start with the letter W?”

*No, there are none. Just the name of my butler, Wilhelm. But he is an imp and not too bright. He cannot grant the ability to use the dark arts.*

“She didn’t do the drawing right at all,” Alex said. “Of course, she is pretty old and blind. But still, that’s no excuse.”

And the demon said: *You’re right, kid.*

“Seems like she’s trying to trick you,” Alex continued. “I wouldn’t let her get away with that. She could go tell all her friends and then everyone will make fun of you behind your back.”

The sound of a thousand beating wings filled the room.

His fake grandma finally found her voice again. “Please have mercy, my lord! I can explain everything! This body is old and blind, and Robby here...”

“Alex,” he corrected her.

“What?” she asked.

“My name is Alex.”

The sound of flapping wings grew even more ominous. Lightning flashed outside.

*You have insulted me with your insolence! And that electric cauldron hiding in the corner is just the icing on the cake! Not that there's any cake down here, or anything...*

“Please have mercy, my lord!” she cried again.

Moments passed. Then the demon spoke: *I shall grant you your wish, Elizabeth.*

She collapsed on the floor. “Thank you! You will not regret this decision!”

*Go now! Go to your new body in Boulder, Colorado!*

The circle grew brighter and then there was a flash of light. The woman Alex was supposed to call grandma passed out inside the circle and remained motionless for some time.

The sound of flapping wings vanished.

Outside, the storm passed.

#

“Is that your grandma?” Mrs. Anderson asked.

Alex stood on his neighbor's front steps. He couldn't speak clearly with the fake vampire teeth wedged in his mouth, so he plucked them out and stuck them in his pocket. "Yeah," he said. "But don't move too quick or anything. She startles easy."

Alex's grandmother stood in the front yard of his neighbor's property. After the incident last month, it took her a long time to figure out how to walk again. Now she was back down on all fours and drinking rainwater from a kiddie pool.

Mrs. Anderson gave a sorrowful look. Then she grabbed two handfuls of candy and placed them in Alex's bag. "Sorry to hear that, dear. A stroke?"

"Nope. She used to be a witch. Now she's a horse."

"No, I mean a *stroke*. Like a small heart attack. Or does she suffer from dementia?"

Alex wasn't quite sure what she meant. He had run into this problem a few times tonight. When he told his neighbors his grandmother was a horse, some of them laughed and watched her pace up and down the sidewalk and handed him a ton of candy. Others gave him a weird look and shut their door. At least his grandmother was nice now.

"Yeah, I guess," he lied. "She used to be an actress. She was in a bunch of plays."

"Oh, that's so sad. Give your family my blessing, Alex. And Happy Halloween!"

"Thanks Mrs. Anderson. Happy Halloween!"

Alex hopped off the steps and helped his grandma up, then led her to the sidewalk.

"I think I should have gone as a cowboy this year," he said, deep in thought. "It makes sense, doesn't it? Oh well, I guess there's always next year."

Alex led her down the street using some carrots. She loved vegetables now. And she was losing a ton of weight from eating so healthy.

They walked toward the next house and he held her hand lovingly and she snorted and went faster.

She loved going for walks now.

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