

The Gift of Giving

By Ria Prestia

The night was cold in the small town of Lovealot. Fall had passed and winter was now bringing its crisp air to the people who inhabited this quaint majestic town that was located in the northern part of New York State. The people of the town were close and cared for each other; for all except one.

It was 1980 and the townspeople were at the town square decorating for the approaching holiday season. It was two weeks till Christmas—twelve days to be exact—and the children were laughing and playing as everyone gathered around for the annual tree lighting ceremony. All the citizens were there except for one, Mrs. Grunge. She sat in her rocking chair on the second floor of her old Victorian house and peered out the window with her black cat and watched the people celebrate.

Mrs. Grunge's house was one block from the town square and it was situated on a block with a couple of houses that were now not occupied. They were vacation homes to people who only came up in the summer months. There were no neighbors to the left or right of her which kept the area completely dark except for the one light that came from the upstairs room that Mrs. Grunge and her cat, Priscilla, were using. The Grunge home was an old Victorian that had deteriorated with age. The steps would creak as you approached and the lights were either dim or never on. The children and adults throughout the years avoided the house, and in years passed it was told that old lady Grunge was a witch. No one even knew her exact age, but they would watch her from afar and never approach her, even when she went to the market.

Old lady Grunge sat in her rocker and petted her cat, Priscilla. She stared out the window towards the sky and said to Priscilla, "The moon is not full tonight. The darkness will be thick once these awful festivities stop. How can those people celebrate? What is there to celebrate? Life is hard and cruel and happiness is limited to the few. I wish this season would pass quickly." Mrs. Grunge stood up and held Priscilla close to her as she walked away from the window. She could hear the music and laughter from the street below and it made her cringe inside with anger.

Down at the town square the children were dressed in their winter coats and hats and gloves and were playing in the new snow that had just fallen that day. The local coffee house was open and serving piping hot chocolate topped with whipped cream and marshmallows. Music was playing from the large gazebo that stood in the park, and people were gathered all around singing and talking as they decorated the

large tree that sat in the center of Main Street.

John McKenna picked up some snow and began to play with it in his glove as he said to his sister, Cassie, "Hey, that was old lady Grunge in the window staring at us."

"You think so?" Cassie asked.

"You can't miss that old witch," John said as he formed a snowball.

Cassie started to laugh and just said, "John, you really don't believe she's a witch, do you?"

"Come on, Cassie, don't be so naive. Everyone in town knows she's casting spells on people. Don't you remember at Halloween when Mrs. Williams accidentally walked passed the Grunge house and seconds later old man Miller hit her with his truck?"

Cassie rolled her eyes and said in a condescending tone, "That wasn't witchcraft! Old man Miller didn't have his glasses on while he was driving!"

"Yeah, because Mrs. Grunge used witchcraft to make him forget to put them on," John said as he moved closer to Cassie. "Listen, Cassie, if you really don't believe she's a witch, I dare you to walk up to the front door and ring the bell."

Cassie got really serious and began to bite her lower lip which told John that she was nervous. She looked up at John with a frown and said, "Well . . .uh . . .maybe she is a witch, but . . .but . . . maybe she isn't."

* * *

The tale that was told to the young and the old was that old lady Grunge was a witch. She was outcasted from the town 18 years earlier when strange things happened in that house. Screams and cries would be heard from the house in the middle of the night. She would only come out, at night, after the sun went down wearing a shawl that covered most of her face. It appeared as if she was always carrying a strange book. No one knew what it was, but they believed it was a book of magic. Her son stopped coming

around, and it was said that he feared for his life.

"Wow, it's cold outside," Mrs. McKenna said as she entered the house and shook the snow from her coat onto the entrance way rug. Mr. McKenna and John and Cassie followed her in and shook the snow off of their coats and hung them onto the coat rack that was placed in the corner by the front door. Mr. McKenna headed into the living room and started a fire in the fireplace as Cassie began to rub her hands together for warmth.

"Mom," Cassie said.

"What, honey," Mrs. McKenna said as she sat down on the sofa and watched the fire start in the fireplace.

"Do you believe that old lady Grunge is a witch?"

"A witch!" Mrs McKenna said surprised. She started to smile and placed her hand on Cassie's arm and said, "No, honey. I don't think so."

John turned around and yelled, "She's as much of a witch as I am your son, Mom! She is creepy and has that long white hair."

Mrs. McKenna shook her head and held back her laughter and calmly said, "John, you watch too much television."

"Oh, come on, Mom!" John said as he looked straight into his mother's eyes. "She looks like a witch, and she carries that book around all the time. It's a book of spells! I just know it!"

Mr. McKenna put his newspaper down on the table and said, "John, have you seen the book?"

John quickly turned to his dad and quietly said, "No . . . I . . . I haven't seen the book . . . but we know it's a book of spells."

"Whose we, John?" Mr. McKenna asked.

"All us kids. Dad we know the stories for years about Mrs. Grunge. She's been in that house practicing magic on the townspeople."

Mr. McKenna began to rub his head as he leaned forward in his chair. "John, please sit down on the chair next to me." John complied and moved over to the adjacent chair and sat down with a solemn face that was expecting a lecture.

"Listen, I don't know much about Mrs. Grunge. When your mom and I moved here thirteen years ago we asked people about her and we were told to stay away from her. No one ever said anything more about it. She hardly ever goes out except to go to the market which is usually at night after the sun sets."

"Maybe people should just let the old lady be," Mrs. McKenna interjected.

Cassie pulled on her mom's pants and said, "She was staring out the window tonight watching us decorate."

"She was?" Mrs. McKenna asked curiously.

"She was watching us and casting spells on us!" John said.

"Oh, John, your imagination is very wild for a thirteen year old boy!"

"Mom," Cassie said with sadness in her tone, "I feel sorry for her. Maybe she isn't mean, but lonely."

Mrs. McKenna gave a small sigh and touched Cassie's cheek with her soft hand as she sat next to her on the sofa. Mr. McKenna became very serious as he spoke, "I don't know, Cassie. People can be strange and also dangerous. I don't want you going over there or near that house. I know you're good-hearted and curious, but you're nine years old, and I want you to listen to me. Do you understand?"

"Yes Daddy," Cassie said.

"You too, John. You stay away from the Grunge house as well."

Mrs. McKenna gave Cassie a hug and said, "Come on. It's time for bed."

The door to the bedroom closed and Cassie stared at the ceiling thinking to herself about Mrs. Grunge. Finally, she decided to get out of bed and pray. She knelt down on the side of the bed and folded her hands in front of her. Quietly in a low whisper, she prayed, "Dear God, Mrs. Heart, my teacher says that all people are good and it is bad things that happen to them that make them mean. I want to pray for Mrs. Grunge that she be happy."

* * *

Days went by and finally it was the last day of school before winter break. All the kids got out early to begin their vacation. The snow flurries were already starting to fall as John and his friends, Joe and Tommy stopped at the park to talk and hang out.

"Let's break in!" Tommy said.

“How can we do that?” Joe asked.

While scratching his head, John came up with a great idea, “We need to break into the house when she leaves and steal the book. Then we can show it to the townspeople and everyone will have proof that she is a witch.”

“Doesn’t she carry that book around with her all the time?” Joe asked.

“She doesn’t take it with her to the market,” John quickly said.

Tommy said, “How do you know that, John?”

John looked at Tommy and with a lot of enthusiasm he said, “Because last week when I went to the grocers on Friday night with my mom, old lady Grunge was there and she didn’t have the book. I guess she can’t carry it along with her groceries. I think she goes every Friday because my mom has talked about seeing her there to my dad at dinner time.”

Joe started to get hesitant at the idea. “I don’t know about this. Maybe we shouldn’t do it.”

Tommy turned towards Joe and gave him a little push on the shoulder as he said, “Are you afraid,” In a sarcastic tone.

“No . . . no . . . I . . . I just thought that . . .”

Tommy cut off Joe’s words quickly and said, “Well, don’t think. That’s our job.” Then Tommy turned to John and asked, “Okay, Mr. Rocket Scientist, how do we get into the witches house?”

John gave a chuckle, “It’s simple. Tonight at dusk we tell our parents that we’re going to the movies and instead we sneak over to the Grunge house and go in through the kitchen window.”

“What if she’s home,” Joe asked.

“She won’t be. I can pretty much guarantee that she’ll be at the grocers.”

The boys huddled into a circle and began to whisper. John said, “We’ll use the walkie talkies. Joe will stay outside and look for her when she returns. He’ll use the walkie talkies to let us know. John looked at Joe and said, “Can you handle it?”

Joe shook his head, “Yeah, you can count on me.”

John gave a sigh, “Good. It’ll be easy to get into the kitchen window. I break into mine all the time when I forget my keys. It’ll only take a few minutes to get the book and get out.”

“Get what book?” The high pitched voice asked from behind John.

John quickly turned around and asked, “How long have you been here, Cassie?”

“Not very, why?” She asked.

John looked a bit frazzled at first and then composed himself. “No reason,” he said. “Why are you here?”

“You’re supposed to walk me and Susan home.”

“Oh, I forgot.” He turned quickly to his friends and said, “I betta go guys. We’ll talk more later.”

* * *

As planned the boys met at old lady Grunge’s house. They hid in the bushes and waited to see if she left the house as they had predicted.

“Move over,” Tommy said.

“Shush! Be quiet,” John said.

“It’s a bit hard to hide in bushes that have thorns,” Tommy said.

“Okay. What did I say? Like clockwork, there she goes.” John whispered.

The boys watched as old lady Grunge locked the front door and slowly walked down the steps of the porch and out the gate.

“Did she have the book?” Joe asked.

“I didn’t see it in her hands. All I saw was her handbag and her empty cart.”

“Okay, let’s go,” Tommy interjected. “Remember Joe, keep an eye out. If we’re not out before she comes back tell us on the walkie talkies.”

“I’m cool man. I got it under control.”

“Let’s go, Tommy,” John said.

* * *

“Tommy, what luck! I can’t believe the kitchen window was open!” John said.

“Yeah,” Tommy said while snickering, “we live in such a safe community.”

John just smiled and said, “Come on, let’s just get the book. It’s probably in the living room.” As the boys left the kitchen they hear a crash and quickly turn around.

“Hey, guys help us!”

Tommy heard the yell and ran back into the kitchen to see Cassie trying to help Susan down from the counter.

“Cassie, what are you doing here?” John said angrily.

“Don’t do anything to Mrs. Grunge, John. Don’t take her book!”

John was mad and started to give Cassie orders. “Cassie, you and Susan need to get out of here, now!”

“I’m not going!” Cassie said back at him. “Wait till Dad finds out about this. You’ll be grounded for a year or more!”

“I found it!” Tommy yelled from the other room.

John ran into the living room with Cassie and Susan following from behind.

“Great! Give it to me, Tommy,” John said as he grabbed the book from Tommy’s hands. In the haste, the book fell to the ground and tons of papers flew out of it.

“Oh, No,” Cassie said as she covered her mouth.

“You idiot, Tommy! Look at what you did!” John yelled as he scrambled onto the floor to pick up the papers.

“I didn’t do it! You did, John!” Tommy said as he started to help him pick up the stuff.

Cassie bent over and picked up a picture that had landed by her feet and said, “This looks like Mrs. Grunge when she was young.”

John stood up and leaned the flashlight over the picture and said, “Hey yeah, it does look like her.” He took the photo from Cassie and placed it on the table with the book and all the other papers. He held the flashlight over the stuff as Tommy asked, “What is all this stuff?”

“It looks like news articles and photos,” John said. “Not a witches book.”

“It’s a scrap book,” Cassie said. “Sort of like the ones grandma used to make.”

Cassie held up a letter and said, “This is addressed to her and it comes from Germany.”

Susan interjected, “And this one comes from Vietnam.” Susan opened the letter up and started to read it. “Dear Mom, I don’t know what to say. This is far worse than I ever imagined when I enlisted. Vietnam is different than Dad’s stories of WWII that he sent in his letters. I hope I can make it through my tour. I hope to come home alive. I’m really scared, and I miss you.”

Susan looked up at everyone and stopped reading.

John held up an official type of letter. “This is from the government. It says,

Dear Mrs. Grunge, we regret to have to inform you that your husband has been killed in combat . . .” John put his head down. “It’s dated December 23 1941.”

Tommy held up another letter. “Oh wow, this one says the same thing except it’s her son and it’s dated 1965.”

John felt bad and said, “Wow, they both died in wars. Look at this stuff it’s not a book of spells, it’s a book of her life. What have we done?”

“John, I can’t believe this. Look at all these photos of her with her husband,” Cassie said.

“And here are some of her with her son dressed in his uniform,” Susan said.

“This isn’t good,” Tommy said. We need to get out of here.”

“Yeah,” John agreed. “We need to fix this stuff and get out.”

Tommy and John started to put the stuff back into the book when they heard Joe’s voice in a panic over the walkie talkie. “Quick guys, she’s coming back. Get out!”

“Okay, we’re coming, Joe!” John said quickly.

“I told you that she wasn’t a witch, John! She’s just a lonely old lady who has some real sorrows.”

“Cassie, okay, you’re right, but let’s go!”

They all ran for the door just as old lady Grunge walked in.

“What are you children doing in my house!” She yelled.

“Come on, run!” John yelled.

John and Tommy ran out the door as Cassie and Susan froze in their place.

* * *

It wasn’t until John, Tommy and Joe were well passed town that they realized Cassie and Susan weren’t with them. Cassie and Susan got stuck behind. John began to panic and decided that he needed to go home and get his parents. He knew they would be furious with him, but he was more concerned for Cassie. So John, Tommy and Joe raced to John’s house to get Mr. and Mrs. Mckenna.

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Cassie and Susan sat on the sofa near Mrs. Grunge and were very quiet. Mrs. Grunge put a plate of cookies out and some milk. She poured milk into all three glasses and said, "Why don't you girls have some cookies. They're very good. I baked them myself."

Cassie looked at Susan and Susan looked at Cassie and then they each took a cookie and a glass of milk. The cookies were good. They were soft and buttery and had the best vanilla icing on top of them. "They taste like my grandmother's used to taste."

"Do your grandparents live close by?" Mrs. Grunge asked.

"No. I only have a grandfather and he lives a few hours away. My grandmother's are both dead," Cassie said sadly.

There were silences for a few minutes as they all ate and then Cassie said, "Mrs. Grunge I am sorry, and I want to apologize for my stupid brother and his friends."

Mrs. Grunge smiled. "I accept your apology Cassie, but you shouldn't apologize for the boys. They need to apologize for themselves."

"I'm sorry, too Mrs. Grunge," Susan added. "We tried to stop them, but we didn't do a very good job of it."

"Mrs. Grunge, I feel bad about your son and your husband," Cassie said.

"That must have been awful," Susan added.

"It was awful. However, talking about it with you two lovely young ladies is helping. I have never talked about it with anyone. I seem to have bottled myself up in this old house."

"We are sorry. I can't believe that people think you're a witch."

"Oh, Cassie," Mrs. Grunge chuckled a bit, "I never stopped the rumors. I actually thought it was funny and it helped to keep people away from me. Which is what I wanted. I have been so involved in my own sorrow that I stopped living life. Sadness will do that to you."

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door, and Mrs. Grunge got up to answer it.

"May I help you," she said as she stared into the eyes of a familiar couple that she had seen, but never knew their names.

"Hello Mrs. Grunge. I'm Tom McKenna, and I believe my daughter Cassie is here, and this young man standing behind me with his friends is my son John."

John walked from behind his dad with his head down. Tommy and Joe did the same thing as Cassie rushed up and stood next to Mrs. Grunge.

"Hi Daddy. Hi Mommy."

“Cassie, are you alright,” Mrs. McKenna asked.

“Yes, Mommy. Susan and I are having cookies and milk with Mrs. Grunge.”

Mrs. Grunge closed the door and moved into the living room. “Please come in,” she said.

“Mrs. Grunge, there seems to be some confusion around here, and some unexcusable mischief,” Mr. McKenna said as he looked sternly at the boys. “The boys seem to have an overzealous imagination and they have caused you some harm. I hope we can work this out in a friendly manner.”

Mrs. Grunge’s stern face started to soften. “He reminds me of my son who was also a very curious boy with a vivid imagination.” She looked up at Mr. McKenna. “I understand children. Your daughter and her friend are very sweet and pleasant to talk to.”

Cassie picked up the book and showed it to her mom. “It isn’t a book of spells, Mommy. It’s a book full of photos and letters. Pictures of Mrs. Grunge and her husband and son.”

“They both died in wars. My husband in WWII and my son in Vietnam. The ironic thing is that they never knew one another. My husband died before our son was born. I moved to Lovealot with my son a few weeks before he enlisted. I was so miserable after his death that I stayed to myself in my home. I knew people thought I was a witch. I just let the rumors live.” Mrs. Grunge wiped her eyes.

“I believe that John has something to say to you.” Mr. McKenna looked sternly at his son and his friends.

“We’re sorry, Mrs. Grunge,” John said. “It was all my idea. I have to take the blame. We haven’t been the nicest to you and breaking into your house tonight to steal a book seems pretty stupid to me right now. I don’t know what else to say, but the guys and I need a punishment of some sort. Maybe we can help fix up your house some how? Clean the yard or the porch?”

“That might be a good idea,” Mr. McKenna said. A little community service might teach you three a valuable lesson. What do you think Mrs. Grunge?”

“I think it’s an excellent idea. This old house could use a little care. I think that would work out.”

“Good. Then over this holiday break, you boys will start by shoveling the snow and cleaning the front porch. I’ll make a nice list. It will keep you three out of trouble for a while,” Mr. McKenna said.

“They must have a little room for fun,” Mrs. Grunge said.

“Just a little so that mischief can’t happen,” Mr. McKenna added. “I’m sure Tommy and Joe’s parents will agree with me.”

Mrs. McKenna interrupted and said, “Mrs. Grunge, why don’t you join us for Christmas Eve at our house.”

“That’s a wonderful idea,” Mr. McKenna added. “My wife makes a fabulous meal and we attend midnight mass if you would like to come with us?”

“Oh, Mrs. Grunge, I would like you to join us. I think you would enjoy it.” Cassie eyes lit up as she spoke.

“I haven’t had an invitation in so long. It would be nice to be with people again. It would be nice to have some friends. Thank you. I would love to join you at your home for Christmas.”

“Thank you, Mommy! This is wonderful!” Cassie gave Mrs. Grunge a hug and said, “I knew you were a nice lady deep down. Christmas is all about giving, and I think Mrs. Grunge that you’re getting the best gift of all this year. The gift of friends, family, happiness, and love!”

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