If This, Then That

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"What'll it be, Bella? Shall we hide things this time?"

Isabelle shook her head. Her hair, freshly clean and dry, shivered up her bathrobe to her scalp. She paused, pretended to think, and shook her hair again, just to feel the break of its glassy surface on her neck. "Nope, let's do cards. I've gotten pretty good at finding by myself. I just close my eyes and wait for what's lost to tell me where it is. I found Daddy's checkbook in the front hall closet last week without even trying."

Grandma waved Isabelle into her room, "Cards it is then. Candle, candle? Bella, where does your mother keep her candles?"

Isabelle pointed to a pillar on the guest room dresser and settled herself onto one of the chairs Grandma had pulled from the hall into her room. She leveled her hands, palms down, onto the surface of the tea table and listened to the rhythmic swish of her slippers as they swung, just barely touching, above the floorboards.

Grandma plopped the candle and a deck of playing cards wrapped in a square of silk onto the table and sat down across from Isabelle. The room was warm, with a low-grade hum of cold under the surface. Isabelle knew that the chill had nothing to do with the muscle stiffening, winter damp outside Grandma's window; the cold came from the spirits rising like diluted white from the steamy loam beneath the house.

"Do you feel the cold, Grandma?"

Grandma nodded and with worn, ringless hands unwrapped the cards from the thinning piece of black silk. "Did you memorize the cards like I asked you to last summer, Isabelle?"

Isabelle grabbed a card, looked at its face and responded brightly, "Ten of spades, sudden change." She reached for another, "Ace of spades, strength and power. See, just like you asked."

"This one?"
"Nine of clubs, judgment."
"Very nice. You have a gift, but you need to know your tools, don't you?"

Isabelle looked down at her fingernails and smiled into her lap, picking a little at the fluff on her pink bathrobe. Only Grandma told her that she was gifted. Daddy didn't care for Isabelle's knowing, almost crawling from his well-bred skin like a captured snake when Isabelle told him that his lost keys were under the kitchen sink, or that the phone was about to ring, or even that he was going to miss his golf game because of rain. The people Daddy came from didn't read cards, or listen to the sibilant hiss of the spirits singing from the grave, or spend their money on Shanty-Irish, carnival tricks. Mama didn't mind so much, sometimes, when they were waiting like snails in the bank line, she'd
lean into Isabelle's shoulder, the waltz of her perfume mingling in Isabelle's hair, to whisper, "Which teller, Peanut? We need to go." But Mama was from that sort-of life, like Grandma was.

Isabelle wasn't allowed to do anything she was good at, things that Grandma said she could use to help her family, because Daddy said that Isabelle was to be a different kind-of girl, different from her mother, who was as pretty and gracious as springtime, but, according to Daddy, didn't come from people who were as appropriate as his people. When Grandma came to visit, Isabelle and Grandma worked on her skills in the quiet, dark of the evening, after Isabelle's two younger sisters had been wrapped tight in their quilts in bed, when Mama and Daddy were out. Grandma said that what Daddy didn't know wouldn't hurt him, something she said in a voice as tart as lemons, something she said sounding as if there were a lot of things Isabelle's pale, narrow father didn't know.

"Can I read you, Grandma?"
"Nothing I need to know, Bella."
"Grandma knows all?" Isabelle asked, wigging her eyebrows.
Grandma laughed and squeezed Isabelle's fingers, "That's right, darling, everything. Why don't you just throw out the cards and see what you get?"

Isabelle scrabbled the deck from the waxed surface of the table. Grandma's cards were old and as soft as well washed bed linen. They moved easily, the shuffle and bridge breezing through her fingers, blowing gently on her face. Seduced by their rhythm, Isabelle began rocking gently back and forth to the sound of the cards. Grandma lighted the candle and Isabelle leaned towards its watery glow, her body electric and sensitive to the imperceptible heat of its flame. Dreamily disconnected from her actions, Isabelle stopped shuffling, cut the deck and pulled three cards from the top.

"What do you see, Bella?" Grandma asked from a million miles away.

Two of diamonds, inverted. Queen of spades, upright. Nine of spades, inverted. The room around her, the sound of Grandma's breathing, the creak of the house, the shapes in her peripheral vision were muffled in velvet, but the cards on the table were as focused and sharp as if seen through newly cleaned glass. Isabelle began to speak, like Grandma had taught her to, not thinking, just letting the words rumble from the base of her throat, the spirits whistling in her ears.

"I see Mama. She's all on her own. She's strong."
"Where's your father, Bella?"
"He's on a trip. Gone. There was a big change. It's very cold out, Grandma."
"Are you thinking? Don't think. Just speak."
"I was thinking, a little. Sorry," Isabelle shifted into the back of her head.
"Something has happened. Oh, my God, Grandma, it's Daddy. He's going to be hurt. A snowstorm. A car accident. Grandma!"

Isabelle's body, her thin, little girl skin, was barely able to contain the rush of worry that raced through her arms and legs. She began to wiggle. "This is terrible. Is it true?"

Isabelle heard the rush of silk at the doorway of Grandma's room and then the sound of her mother's voice, "Is what true? Mom, what are you two doing?"

Isabelle whipped her head around and reached for her mother, "It's Daddy, he's going to be in an awful car accident in the snow. I think he dies. I saw it Mama, all of it."
Mama closed her eyes and sighed. She walked into the room, slipped off her pumps and dropped to Isabelle's side. Her hair, the color of reddened sunlight, trembled in the flicker of the candle. "Sweetie," she said, resting an elbow on the table and propping her chin on her fist. "You can't believe everything you see."

"Grandma says I have to be confident about my visions."

"I suppose so, but everything you see won't happen. Sometimes you have to interpret, like maybe Daddy is feeling cold inside, sad, maybe that sad is going to create problems for him. Furthermore, things change Isabelle, maybe what you see won't happen unless other things happen too."

Grandma interrupted. "She'd know that, Maureen, if you and David would let her learn."

Mama rotated her chin on her fist to look at Grandma. "Not now, Mom. Let's clean up the cards. David is on his way in and if he sees this we're sure to experience Isabelle's wreck." Mama was trying to make a joke, but Isabelle knew she was scared. Daddy's temper was quick and nasty. No one liked to make Daddy angry.

Isabelle blew on the candle as Mama grabbed for the cards. Too late though, Isabelle felt her father's presence before she saw him, the chilled air from the outside clinging to his overcoat, the smell of snow melting on musty, damp wool, drifting into the room and sliding down the back of her neck. She knew what he was going to say without hearing him speak.

"For chrissake, Eileen, can't I leave you alone for two hours with my children?"

Isabelle shrunk into the pink fuzz of her bathrobe and pulled her arms through the sleeves. Grandma opened her mouth to retort, but Mama got there faster, "David, let's go into the kitchen. You and I should talk about this first."

Daddy glared at Grandma and then at Mama. He grabbed Mama's arm like it was a leash and marched her through the back hall into the kitchen. Isabelle could hear her father's voice racing through the first floor like scarlet streamers. Mama began to cry, quietly, the sound just barely audible above Daddy's anger.

"Oh, Grandma, he's so angry. This is all my fault. I never should have done this," Isabelle curled into a tiny ball on the chair and began to rock. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Isabelle, he won't hit her with me here."

"But he's going to make you leave this time. I can tell."

"I don't see that happening. When God closes a door, he opens a window."

"Daddy will make you go. And who will take care of Mama then?"

"Believe what you saw, Isabelle. Your mother is strong. She'll be fine."

"No she won't, Grandma. Other things have to happen for Mama to be strong. Even she says that's how it works."

Grandma's reply was cut short by Daddy's voice from the hallway. "Isabelle, my study, now."

"Go, Bella, it's fine."

Isabelle followed her father, her feet wanting to drag, her stomach jerking and shaking, telling her to move quickly. Daddy didn't turn to wait for her at the door of his study. He flicked on the lamp, a path of cold, bluish light flashed through the doorway, and he stormed into the room. Isabelle heard the casters of his chair hiss as he sat down behind his desk.
Out of breath, as if she'd swam a mile up the hallway, Isabelle stood on the square of carpet before him. She knew he wouldn't hit her, he was proud that he never struck his children. Proud that he could make them behave in other ways. Isabelle nodded in all the right places while Daddy scolded, she'd heard the lecture before - You won't, You can't, stupid behavior.

As Daddy spoke, Isabelle watched the snow fall on the other side of the window behind her father. The lights of the house next door flicked on and off as the neighbors moved closer to bed. The outside looked like a snow globe, safe and gentle. She could hear cars skidding a bit as they reached the stop sign at the corner of her street, a light swish and then a swirl as the tires captured the pavement beneath the snow. Daddy was winding down, the force of his anger easing into annoyance.

"You will not do this again."
"No, Daddy, I won't."
Isabelle didn't move. She just watched that snow fall.
"Isabelle, I told you to do something."
"Daddy, I have a problem."
Daddy sighed, all of his air blowing hard from his chest, "What?"
"I forgot. I'm supposed to bring treats to school for a party tomorrow morning. I'll be in big trouble if I forget them."
"Your mother has gone to bed. She can pick something up in the morning."
"Sir, I need them for first thing."
"You mean that you want me to go out? Now?"
"Yes, sir, please."