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DANCING THE PATH

By Suzanne L. Nikolaisen

Across the kitchen, the coffee machine burbled and Katie looked up from the book she had been reading. She hadn't noticed the light while she was reading, but now she could sense a change. As she watched the light seemed to coalesce and gather – hanging in the air as though it were summer sunbeams catching the air above newly harvested fields. She took a step into the middle of the room, wondering what the source of the light was. It was all around her now and she caught her breath as the luminescence continued to glow around her. A quiet creak broke the preternatural silence as loudly as thunderclap across the mountains. Tensing she noticed a slight breeze as it whispered past, bringing with it the scent of an autumn storm.

She looked and saw the back door was still locked, no one had managed to get into the house. With some relief she gave herself over to watching the beauty of the light as it shimmered through the room as though a wind passing across a golden field of sun ripened wheat. The lights above the kitchen table flickered, and blinked. Her worry returned, she didn't really know what was causing this strange apparation. Was there and electrical storm? Was this dangerous? The wind hadn't picked up and there

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was no crackling as with static electricity, she didn't think this was related to the building storm system that was gathering across the flanks of the mountains.

Her heart quickened and she looked nervously over her shoulder, to find the source of light. *Was... was it her grandmother?* No... she was sure of that, but if not what could explain the strange light? Just as she had thought about explaining the light, it had begun to dim. She reached out to touch the light, and the thin luminescence that remained swirled around her hand and then dispersed. Taking a step back, she caught a cry in throat – it had been so beautiful. Stunned she stood in the quiet of the kitchen, and when she happened to glance at the breakfast nook, she lost her footing. As she fell, her bad ankle no help now, she caught sight of an old woman.

“Hey!” She fell, and took a moment to get back up. Her voice was raspy from not using it all evening. “Hey, who are you!” She was upset. First the light and then someone in her house – but then a slowly and delicately a feeling of calm worked its way across her shoulders and she took a deep breath calming herself. Unsure of herself she took another look at the intruder. She was an old woman, Katie knew that she could help her and then she'd be on her way. Her family was probably worried about her. Unable to stop herself as though on the cusp of a mighty wave, she did a double take - it wasn't any woman, *it was her*.

A cold rush of adrenaline washed through her like a cold shower. Katie scrambled to her feet and noticed the luminescence in the breakfast niche, it was hardly discernable now – the light was coming from the woman. The shadowy radiance shimmered and faded again. Who was she really? Wispy white hair, gathered back from her face in a long braid, bound with ivy, her dark eyes seemed relieved, and yet unsure.

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She was old, much older than she had seemed at first look. She was wearing a gown the color of moonbeams, with tiny gemstones scattered across it like the early morning dew. She studied the crown, it was simple, yet regal. Fine spider web strands of silver, had captured delicate seashells, tiny sparkling jewels and wispy pearls. Tiny spring Ivy tendrils and small wildflowers had been woven around the crown's base. Somehow all of the flowers seemed truly alive. Katie caught her breath in delight. She was truly beautiful, but who was she? Was she an angel?

The woman smiled, as though she had known her thoughts, her kind face wrinkling slightly at the movement. She seemed exhausted and her smile passed quickly, she closed her eyes for a moment. Her shoulders were drooping. Maybe she was an angel, she had appeared to her in the graveyard at her grandmother's funeral – and she realized they had met even before that.

The spring wind had been cold the day of her grandmother's funeral and she had stood alone, apart from the family. She wouldn't be consoled, she had lost her best friend, and it had been the first time anyone she loved had died. When the funeral had ended she had stayed, just to be there with her grandmother and to think. But the sky had a different agenda and the clouds had gathered insisting on a spring shower. She had stayed amongst the flowers that would soon die. Then she had taken from her pocket the packet of crocus bulbs and planted them carefully and lovingly, tears falling as she worked. Her grandmother would have thought it romantic, to have her ashes mixed with growing flowers. She really had been a hopeless romantic, but that had made her even more dear to her. Katie stood back deciding to come back with some tulips and in the summer to plant a couple of plants that would give her grandmother flowers through the year, perennials so they would be with her year after year... Caught up in her thoughts and her unsurity about the hereafter and

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the loss so new, she didn't notice the woman watching her. Her brown chiffon was the dark color of the earth just planted, and her eyes, seemed to sparkle even though the sun was behind the clouds. She handed Katie a few more flower bulbs.

"She would have liked these." She whispered in a soft beautiful voice that brought tears to Katie's eyes again. Her grandmother had so loved spring flowers. Katie took the bulbs and began to plant them, unsure of who this woman was, her tears too near the surface to talk yet. When the bulbs had been planted, and earth stained the knees of her dress she stood up.

"Who are you? I don't think we've met, have we?"

"Oh we used to play when you were a child, dear. I have been a friend of your grandmothers, and of your family for quite some time. I have always come to the women in your family for help, and as a friend."

For help? She didn't seem the kind to just take help, but she didn't know her. In spite of herself she was interested in the old woman.

"I'm sorry, but I don't remember you." The woman's Grey hair was long and loose. She was an eccentric old lady friend of her grandmother's. She seemed the type; more eccentric than those she had met though.

"I didn't think you would dear. But that's as it should be."

They had talked that afternoon, and the woman, Gaea she had called herself had become her friend too. Although she had a strange way of wording things they had quickly become friends. She had finally sobbed on her shoulder, leaving her hot grieving tears on Gaea's hands. She had soothed her as no one else could have; talking gently about her grandmother and their friendship.

She had been her grandmother's friend, but she had never heard about her. By the time she had left for home she had felt not healed, but the pain had turned more

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into a dull ache, and the memories had flitted around like summer butterfly's of the time she had spent with her grandmother. She had realized too late that they hadn't exchanged phone numbers.

Now, she realized she had been seeing this woman, Gaea, everywhere. It had seemed to be the strangest coincidence. They even exchanged smiles when they met now. In the grocery store, the library, passing in the hall at work it had seemed extremely strange, she had never been able to catch up to talk to her, but now... Gaea had always blended in before, and she had always disappeared. She had never appeared to talk as they had in the graveyard – until now - she was sitting calmly in the breakfast niche. This was absurd! How had she gotten in? Her grandmother's favorite teacups still displayed above the window on a small shelf, glimmered in the ethereal light. Who was she? Surely she had been named after mother nature, she couldn't actually be her, could she? But why was she in the kitchen, and the light...

"I've come to talk Katie love." She said. "I need" She paused and then whispered gently "*– I need your help.*"

"My grandmother used to call me that - *Katie love...*" She protested, her voice breaking.

"I know dear and you will always keep her close to your heart." She said it slowly, her voice warm with concern. But now she seemed to be having a hard time, she was sitting slumped in the chair. This wasn't a costume. Who was this lady?

"Your tired. Do you want some coffee, a place to lie down?"

"No, thank you child." Child? She was twenty-seven, surely, she was headed well into woman-hood by now.

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“I have come to you, because you have a good heart. I- I know you are alone. I would have spoken to you sooner, but you keep so busy, and I really didn’t want to intrude until... until I absolutely had to.”

Had to?

“Who are you?” Katie whispered.

“I am old –“ she paused, “Oh Katie child, I am so tired” she whispered. Katie sat down, and put her arm around her shoulders. After a moment she continued. “I am the ancient mother goddess, Gaea to the ancient Greeks, Mother Nature to modern man...”

Katie caught her breath. How could – why was she here?

“I don’t mean to sound grandiose, but I have no time left - to be up front, is to use my titles. I am so very tired dear. Yes coffee would be good. I have so little time...”

“What? What about your time?” Katie said as she stood up to find a coffee cup, her voice full of concern. This woman had always been courteous, when they had passed, and the glow was fading now. This woman, Gaea - she couldn’t die, could she? Maybe she meant she had other places to go. She decided that must be it, only because she couldn’t accept the other.

“Thank you.” She accepted the cup with thin aged fingers that were as delicate as faded coral.

“All things renew - caterpillar into a butterfly, trees follow the seasons, and thus I have come to the end of my season. It is my time - my time of renewal.”

What did she mean? Time of renewal?

“Every second millennia, I reach a time when my strength no longer can carry me forward, and I must renew. I loose much of my knowledge however it comes

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back with maturity, and there is a certain - uh, a certain instinctive-ness to me before..."

She dropped the coffee cup and it shattered on the tile floor.

"Uhhhh." She groaned, reaching for Katie. Her eyes filled with pain.

"What can I get for you? What can I do?" It was obvious that she was in pain, and that she was completely exhausted. She whispered, but nothing came out, instead she gripped Katie's hand tightly.

"I'll stay with you. You won't be alone." Katie whispered. What was happening, was there really this renewal thing? Something was happening to her. What could she do for her?

She had been looking into Gaea's eyes, when she realized the lines on her face were fading away, as though being etched away by an airbrush before her eyes. Gaea's eyes warmed, they had been unfocused, for a moment, but now she met Katie's eyes as though looking for strength, for this ordeal, her grip tightened on her hand.

She tried to protect Gaea, from the ravages of pain that wracked her but she was helpless, and Gaea reached up with a shaking hand and touched the center of her forehead before she allowed herself to close her eyes again. That was when the memories began to emerge as though they had been called forth. The mud pies they had made together when she had been in kindergarten and her family had moved to Utah, she had felt so alone they had lived in a new neighborhood, with only a few houses, and no children her age. They had played in rain puddles and woven dandelion crowns, but when school had started she now realized she had been able to

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make some friends and Gaea had simply disappeared. Her mother had thought Gaea an imaginary friend.

The nightmare, the night she couldn't wake her parents by calling to them, and she had been too afraid to get out of bed to go get them. The cool and soothing hand on her forehead and the rush of scent that had filled her darkened teenage bedroom, of summer flowers and rain. Gaea had sung to her in a language she didn't understand, and had held her hand chasing the darkness and terror away.

The process was speeding up, and she groaned in pain, her eyes becoming distant again, as pain wrenched through her body, she was getting younger every few seconds. Katie held her new friend, and tried to comfort her when she closed her eyes in pain, or cried out, the night wore on, and just after midnight it, had completed. The renewal cycle had followed its course.

Tears streamed down Katie's face, but she held on to her metamorphosing friend, her life long friend she now knew, always there for her – there were so many other memories now... she hugged Gaea to her, – shocked to see her now a teenager, and felt her shaking as the change continued.

She whispered to her and tried to sooth any fears and pain. She brushed her hair out of her eyes and was given a look of love and gratitude, swiftly stolen away by the agony she was going through - the change continued, more quickly now, She was a young girl, but the changes were still wracking at her.

The kitchen was warm, and Katie found herself still on her knees, a young girl not much older than two, on her lap. The gown was enormous and falling off, her hair dark and curly. Her eyes held the same immortal love glowing warm and golden in them and innocence had replaced the exhaustion.

“Ma Ma” The toddler queried.

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“No, honey, not Ma Ma.” She squeezed the child’s hand reassuringly and tried to smile.

“Ma Ma” The child said, a smile spreading over her face. She said it with certainty.

Katie looked at her, this is what she had meant?

“I have come to you, because you have a good heart.”

She caught her breath. Questions were flooding her mind. Goose bumps trailing down her arms.

“I really didn’t want to intrude until... until I absolutely had to.”

The little girl had turned in a couple circles and fallen to the floor the gown twisted around her. She giggled, playing. Katie smiled.

“What are you doing?! What are you doing?!” Katie tickled her tummy. And the child laughed and laughed. Once Katie had untangled the gown, the child gave a little jump, playing with the gown. She jumped another time. Then she began to point, a game Katie had played many times with her niece Amanda. She responded as the child pointed to the sink, the window, a smile of excitement as she pointed to the house plants. She began to sing.

“Doo doo doo...”

“It’s late, time to get ready for bed.” Katie said. The child’s eyes did have dark smudges under them, they would go away with a good night’s rest.

“Sleepy time.” She found herself falling into the language she used with her niece. Gaea had truly intended her to raise her? She had always wanted children eventually – she had never imagined anything like being a foster mother to a goddess. Shivers ran across her arms again.

“Oh, Ma Ma” The child said heartbreakingly, but smiled when Katie looked into her eyes.

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“You know it’s bedtime.” Katie smiled. “Come on, sweetie, I think I’ve got some extra training pants for Amanda, and a T-shirt will have to do for you to sleep in tonight...”

“Ok.” The child said and jumped again, the gown was in her way.

Once the child queen had finished a glass of milk, cookie crumbs still clinging to the corners of her mouth, she had fallen asleep in Katie’s arms.

Katie lay awake, thinking. She worked full time... would she quit or be able to scale back her hours to part time. If she worked, what about day care? What about all the legalities? She groaned, but Gaea wouldn’t have come to her, is she wouldn’t have been able to manage. And she wouldn’t have come to her if they hadn’t been such dear friends all of those years. She would have wanted her to choose her to help — she was glad that she had chosen to come to her. She had to trust Gaea, she had known what she was doing. With a calm feeling of acceptance, she realized that they would be ok. Somehow she’d work everything out.

Jen, her sister would have to come over first thing in the morning, and they’d talk, but for now, she would sleep. Tonight she held the world’s queen in her arms. She’d been through a lot. The little girl, still holding onto Katie’s thumb, sighed, rolled onto her side. Snuggling against Katie she fell into a deeper slumber, full of dreams of wonder.