

The Crypt

The raspy voice startled me out of my reverie. “Dearie, come sit by me and have some lemonade.”

I bent over and squinted at the wrinkled old woman sitting underneath the umbrella. Dressed in white and surrounded by daisies, pansies and marigolds, she reminded me of a mummy. I wasn’t sure I wanted to sit by a mummy.

“My granddaughter Amanda makes excellent lemonade. You must have some. Only fifty cents each. A bargain on a hot summer’s day.”

I was tempted. The air was humid and my clothes were sticking to my body. The deodorant I had put on this morning had stopped working hours ago. And waiting for my parents to return from the drug store across the street was not my idea of a good time. My whole day was going down the tubes fast.

In fact, this whole genealogy vacation was a bad idea. Driving across the county to visit relatives I’d never seen was tiring, and looking up family records in courthouses was totally boring! And these visits to cemeteries were something I could very well do without, thank you very much. Who cares when people lived and died? Looking at the graves of relatives just did not turn me on. I missed my TV and my TiVO and my DVD player and my VCR and, of course, my Internet chat rooms. Did I feel sorry for myself? Just a bit.

So now I was out in the blazing sun, babysitting my pesky, ten-year-old brother. It could have been worse, though. Totally immersed in his hip hop music, Arnold was at least keeping the noise to himself. Long live earphones!

I sat down, balancing my body on the edge of a rusty metal chair. “I’ll take two, please.”

“Amanda, two lemonades for our friends here,” the old woman commanded. The youngster by her side slowly filled two plastic glasses with crushed ice. Beads of moisture rolled down the sides of the glasses. Suddenly I was very thirsty.

The girl handed one glass to me and the other glass to my brother. Although his mind was a million miles away and his feet were not missing a single beat, Arnold downed the lemonade without spilling a drop. Such talent.

“Thank you. This is a great idea.” I scraped the bottom of my purse and managed to come up with a dollar in coins. The sweet scent of bougainvillea filled the air as I leaned back in the chair. It was much cooler under the umbrella. Life was slowly improving.

“You’re welcome.” The old woman leaned back in her own chair. “I always enjoy company. Not many people visit here on such a hot day. What’s your name?”

I looked around. “Here” was a flower stand in front of a cemetery. I hoped we didn’t have to go in there. I wasn’t in the mood for any dead relatives today.

“Uh, my name is Kathryn.” I took a big gulp of lemonade so I wouldn’t have to talk. The drink was quite good, actually. I took another swallow, slower this time.

“Do you live around here?”

“No, we’re just passing through. Arnold and I are waiting for our parents.”

“Amanda, we’re getting low on ice,” the old woman said. “Run and get more, please.”

Without a word, Amanda retrieved the coins I had given her and walked slowly toward the mini mart on the corner. The bright, mid-afternoon sun beat down on her back. She must be hot, I thought.

The old woman sighed. “Such a nice girl, so obedient. I’m lucky to have her. We use a lot

of ice in the summer. My flowers like it, too.”

“Do a lot of people come to this cemetery?” I asked.

“Oh, yes. Do you see the crypt at the top of the hill? That white, stone building partly covered with vines?”

I turned to peer through wrought-iron bars. “Yes.”

“It’s a popular place to visit. It overlooks the valley and is surrounded by benches so people can sit and enjoy the view. The lady who was buried there didn’t like to be alone.”

I really didn’t want to hear this. Maybe I could escape somehow. I glanced at my brother who was waving his arms and tapping his feet to music only he could hear. He was oblivious to my plight. No help there. I peered across the street. No parents in sight. Darn. What were they buying in there anyway?

“Yes, my dear, there’s quite a story about that crypt. Many years ago, there was a rich widow lady who lived in the most beautiful house in town. Husband was long gone, and they never had any children. No family around at all, it seemed, and no friends to speak of. But she did have a maid and a cook for female company, and she also had a butler and a gardener. Those four were her only confidants.

I took a sip of lemonade, hoping that if I didn’t talk, she wouldn’t either. No such luck.

“She was a master at yoga and meditation. She could leave her body and travel with her consciousness to other dimensions.”

I was intrigued in spite of myself. “Really? Can someone actually do that?” I must have looked very skeptical because the old woman laughed.

“Yes, it’s called astral projection. You can believe it. I know for a fact that she could do this. I saw her.”

“Wow! What kind of dimensions do you mean?”

“Dimensions where space and time have no meaning, where even emotions like love and joy are left far behind. Dimensions of light and energy and magnetic attraction.”

Sounds rather complicated, I thought to myself. But how cool to be able to do this. Wonder how long you had to meditate. Five or ten minutes? I could handle that. Wonder if you could meet aliens in these other dimensions. You could be famous and be on all the talk shows and make lots of money and your friends would envy you.

“So what happened out there?” I asked.

“Whenever she went on these wondrous journeys, she left her body behind. Her body was in a reduced state of animation. Metabolic functions like breathing and heart rate were very low, almost non-existent. In fact, one day she returned from a journey to find herself surrounded by paramedics. The maid had found her unconscious in the bedroom and had called for help.”

“How embarrassing,” I commented. “Imagine coming back to earth and finding yourself surrounded by strangers when you expected to be alone.”

“It was a good lesson for the woman. She didn’t want to wake up in the morgue, but she didn’t want to stop traveling, either. There had to be a solution to her problem.”

Arnold took off his earphones. “I have to go to the bathroom,” he announced, “right now.”

“Go find Mom and Dad. They’re still in the drug store.” Hopefully they had bought what they needed by this time and could help him.

I watched Arnold trot across the street. “So how did she solve her problem?”

“She needed a contingency plan.”

“What’s a contingency plan?”

“A plan in case something goes wrong with what you are doing.”

“Like Plan A and Plan B, as my mother says?”

“Exactly. She was afraid she would go on a journey and come back to find herself buried alive. So she made her funeral arrangements in advance, like a lot of folks do these days. She ordered that crypt to be built above ground, just like you see it now.”

A young couple stopped to buy pansies and marigolds. I fidgeted while the old woman took their money and made change. Finally she was done. “So what happened?” I demanded.

“Well, as you might expect, the woman continued her far-flung journeys across many dimensions. One day she went so far out for such a long time that her body basically shut down. The servants were unable to revive her and the coroner pronounced her dead of natural causes. She had given instructions to the funeral home not to be embalmed, and her wishes were followed.”

“What does that mean . . . embalmed?”

“Embalming is the chemical preservation of the body. Her wish was that her body be left in its natural state with no effort to preserve it.”

A vision of slimy green worms filled my head. Gross. I took a deep breath and tried to put the picture out of my mind. The old woman continued.

“There was a big funeral service and everyone in town attended. When the will was read, the four servants learned they had inherited the house. But there was no money in the bank for its upkeep. The servants searched the house thoroughly, but they couldn’t find any money.”

“What happened to the woman? Did she wake up inside the crypt?”

“She did indeed. She woke up and climbed out of the casket and left the crypt. No one has seen her since.”

“How do you know all of this?” I tipped my glass and slurped the last of the lemonade.

The old woman frowned. “When the servants couldn’t find any money in the house, they went looking for it elsewhere. They went to the crypt and noticed that the door was unlocked. They went inside and saw the empty casket. They knew she must still be alive and had probably taken the money somewhere. The servants sold the house, divided the money and went looking for new jobs. They never told anyone what they had seen.”

“Why didn’t they call the police?”

“If she had been found alive, the servants might have had to return the money from the sale of the house. If everyone thought she was dead, they could keep the money.”

“Makes sense to me. So everyone thinks the lady is buried there except for the four servants?”

“And the woman herself. That makes five.” The old woman turned as Amanda approached her with the bag of ice. “Ah, yes, we’ll put this in the cooler before it melts.”

I spotted my parents coming out of the drug store, the toe-tapping Arnold in tow. Oblivious to the world - that was my brother. Some things never change! They joined us at the flower stand. The old woman peered at them intently.

“Kathryn, we’re going into the cemetery for a few moments,” my father said. “You can come or stay as you wish.”

Like I wanted to go visit dead relatives. “No thank you. I’ll stay here,” I replied.

“Fine.” My mother steered Arnold toward the gate, my father close behind. I took a few steps toward the gate and watched as they walked up the hill toward the crypt. Back at the flower

stand, the old woman began to ice her flowers.

“You don’t like cemeteries?” Amanda asked.

I jumped slightly at the sound of her voice. Her approach had been silent. Or maybe I was thinking too hard to notice. Together we walked to the gate. The bright red and green bougainvillea arched over our heads, giving us a shady spot and sending a whiff of exotic perfume through the still air.

I turned to Amanda. “Oh, I prefer real live people like your grandmother, even if she is old,” I said. “She’s interesting to listen to.”

“Oh, she’s not my grandmother,” Amanda replied. “She lives next door to my mom and me. I help her out when I can. She doesn’t like to be alone.”

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