

## Gricilis



Susan stretched and yawned, luxuriating in her outdoor cast-iron tub. The warm, humid air of the North Carolina summer enveloped her as completely as the steaming bathwater swirling around her. The metal claw feet of the tub rested on triangular slabs of slate, and a wrought-iron stand held her soaps. The rusty, cornflower-blue porcelain bathtub was a recent acquisition from The Last Unicorn. A wizardly man named Gaines ran the curious, rambling shop filled with an alluring assortment of antique tubs, gates, and statuaries.

The tub was her alchemical font, where she could float in her own sense of herself, undisturbed and contained. Her counseling practice was rewarding, though consuming, and she recouped and rejuvenated in nature's embrace. She bathed often in the early morning mist, listening to the songbirds and watching the antics of the squirrels, or in the cool evening accompanied by the faint green glow of fireflies. Once, at dusk, a mother deer with two tiny spotted fawns rustled past on stiff, pointed hooves, foraging for tasty treats. One morning her bath was



interrupted by a sleepy possum who stumbled by looking as if it had stayed out a little too long past its bedtime.

From her tub, Susan could see the tiny backyard fairy portal and the small domicile attached to it, covered in curlicued moss and nestled into a small rock face. That morning before stepping into her bath, she had found the remains of an owl's repast near the door and wondered if it were the screech owl, the great horned, or the barred owl who had left the sign. These were the three owls that called her to Fairyland: Otus, a tiny screech owl with a soft but distinct whirring call; Bubo, the great horned owl, tall and stately, his plumicorns perched on either side of his intelligent eyes; and Strix, the barred owl, sweet, friendly, and always ready for a cuddle. These were the night callers that signaled her time to enter the fairy domain. Three caterwauls from an owl brought her to the gateway to enter and don her fairy form. If called by day, Corvus the crow brought the message with three raucous caws delivering the fairy invitation.

As she added a smidgeon more hot water to her bath, three scratchy, cacophonous cries reached her ears. Spying Corvus as he alighted on the edge of the tub, she scratched him on his head as she stepped out of the water and reached for her towel.

Arriving at the portal she touched the tiny carved knob, and the change began. One of her favorite parts of the liminal travel was the casting off of her mortal form, evoking the pleasure of peeling off a heavy coat in a warm and crowded room. As her human form dissolved, the air rushed into the tip-top of her lungs as if to inflate the wings that bloomed from her back. The fairy frame claimed her, from her tiny tipped ears to the plumose wings stretching beyond her filmy robe.

As she fled through the dark labyrinth, she banked from left to right, exaggerating the dip and tilt of her flight. It had been awhile since

she had flown, and she wanted to enhance the rare and thrilling sensation. Her intuition often gave her a hint as to the transport awaiting her at the fairy exit. She had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, so she guessed Gricilis, the dark fairy, had sent for her. As she came to this realization, her teacher appeared before her in her mind's eye.

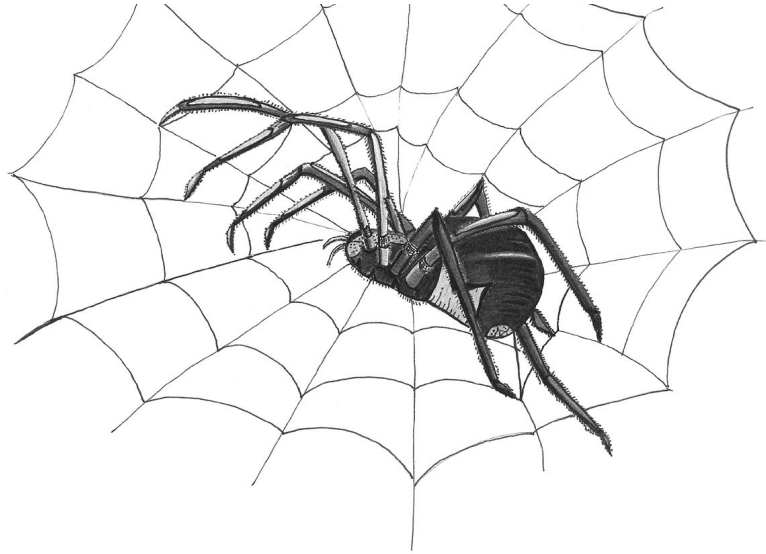
11



Gricilis wore a long coat of dense cobwebs, spun and felted like boiled wool, that reached down to her ankles. Her feet were encased in dark, leathery calluses layered so thickly that she sported them like cobbled Italian sandals. Her black, frizzy hair, peppered with streaks of yellowish gray, was dreaded, and from time to time the curious and diminutive head of a mite, tick, or earwig would peek out from behind a tangle of tangled locks. Her ears were like dark, renegade ships, the upper portions pointed like sails reaching for invisible winds, and the lobes heavy and swollen as with a catch of fish.

Her nose was angled and twisted, making its lazy way down the midline of her corrugated face, shadowing the craggy opening of her cracked and dried lips. Her eyes, deep voids, stared like the yawning openings of caves on a moonless night. Her voice scratched and clawed its way out of her throat, making any greeting or comment sound ominous and threatening. Her hands were stained dark and yellow from years—even centuries—of mixing herbal concoctions. Her nails—long, sharp, and tinged with vermilion—were the same nails that would tap a point on Susan's body whenever the dark fairy searched for whatever ailed her.

Gricilis's knowledge of health and healing was extensive. She knew that the Earth, Topside and Fairyland alike, held all the cures necessary for the myriad of possible ailments. Like magic, the plants, minerals, and crystals contained all of the healing remedies, as if the ailment and its cure were created on the same day and one had never existed



without the other. Although she respected her teacher's vast wisdom, time with her dragged laboriously. As she thought of Gricilis, Susan felt dread settling in her belly, weighted like a stone.

The sight of the exit door in front of her interrupted her musings about Gricilis. As she came out into the sunlight, she spied the dark outline of a pacing spider. Mrs. Hesperus, a black widow spider, was her usual transport to her teacher. In Topside she had been told to be wary of the venomous spiders with the crimson hourglass marking. She remembered finding one in the woodpile when she was Elfa's age and how quickly her father had come to help her.

Mrs. Hesperus was exceptionally large for her breed, and Susan crawled gingerly onto her back, holding her breath and trying hard not to think about what may have happened to Mr. Hesperus. She barely breathed during the lengthy trip, some of it spent above ground swinging from the thread of silk unwinding from the spider's hindquarters and some traversing through underground passageways. Whenever she traveled with Mrs. Hesperus, Susan could not take a deep breath until the black spider scuttled away into the shadows.

If she was lucky (this being a very relative use of that word), a large flying cockroach called Blatella collected her as she exited the tunnels. He was the color of rust with an oily, crusty thorax, skinny legs, and

long antennae that occasionally brushed her cheek. Blatella was silent and moved very quickly, scurrying to stay in the shade as he delivered her to her destination.

As Mrs. Hesperus dropped her off onto the muddy path leading to the entrance of Gricilis's dungeon, Susan felt the distant reverberation of thunder. The wind whipped the trees nearby, and a flash of summer sheet lightning lit up the tall, heavy door leading to the dark fairy's hovel. Before she could reach the massive door, she was drenched from wing tips to fairy toes by a bucket full of rain falling from the disgruntled sky.

Finally, inside the mudroom, each step brought eerie groans and creaks out of the uneven floorboards. As she walked, her hand touched the mossy, dank wall, sending a shiver through her. She was relieved to see a thin crack of light under the inner door, and as the heavy door creaked open she saw the tall, darksome form of her teacher peering over her recipe books and muttering charms and chants.

Moments later, at Gricilis's orders, Susan found herself moving cautiously down a cold and dimly lit stairwell. Her teacher had sent her to the library to find a book. She counted each step silently to herself, and on the thirteenth one, her foot found the uneven cobblestones at the bottom.

The library was dark as a well. While her eyes searched unsuccessfully for a scintilla of light, she felt her way along the aisles of dusty tomes.

"How curious to have no lighting in a library," she mused aloud.

"You will know which book to choose," Gricilis had told her with a contorted grimace that passed for a grin. And here she was, grime and silt coating her hands and the length of her arms, with no clue as to the intended book. Finally in frustration, she fumbled at a row of books, her hands closing around a slender volume. As she opened it up, a paper lantern popped out of the book's interior and began to glow wanly, the light gradually growing in strength.





As her eyes adjusted to the dim light source, she saw the immense expanse of the chamber of books. Uneven stacks of mildewed books set at different angles looked like the stairwells of haunted houses, and streams of silverfish darted here and there, like children in a candy store rushing from the taffy bin to the lemon drops, too excited to eat. The light from the paper lantern was little help in choosing a book, as there were no titles on any of them. Different sizes, textures, and colors, the spines were blank and withholding, each as silent as a caught thief.

She decided to randomly choose another book, as she had done with the slim volume harboring the paper lantern. Choosing the book for its cover, just as she usually chose a wine in Topside for its fanciful or creative label, was not customarily the wisest course, but she was at a loss. Her eyes skimmed along a nearby shelf until they rested on a deep maroon spine, richly scrolled and embossed with fleurs-de-lis that seemed to dance the length of the book's backbone. Sitting on the edge of a somewhat stable stack of oversized almanacs, Susan opened the book. It was filled to overflowing with miniature copies of letters, photos, torn envelopes, scraps of paper, mementos, Post-its, and newspaper clippings—all from her own life.

She unfolded one thin, onion-skin paper and saw the unmistakable font of her father's old typewriter, the one he used to write the adventures of Peedily Pompeye, an imaginative character whose escapades had entertained her and her siblings. The "e" was slightly higher than the other letters and gave a lilt to the fanciful writing. She sifted through the other papers, as memories flooded her with many sentiments: longing, love, regret, hurt, and amusement—all mingling in the parchment and ink. Feeling overwhelmed, she stuffed the papers back inside and chose another book, looking for a bit of respite from nostalgia.

The next one was fat and covered in black cloth. She cautiously

lifted the cover, and more papers and photos spilled out onto the grimy floor. Leaning down and using the paper lantern book, she could see her own image in the photos. There was one photo of her sitting on her grandmother's lap, one of her dancing with her brother at her sister's wedding, and another of her with her two sisters in identical sailor outfits. She felt the strange mixture of feelings once again, this time accompanied by even more resistance.



Why was she holding the photos so tightly? She suddenly realized that she was afraid that there would be no more adventures, love, and mystery in her life. Yet she felt equally fearful that life would continue and bring her more pain. The old memories pinned her to the past while her fear of the future stifled the creation of new ones. How could she let these old memories rest?

“Where do memories naturally go? Where do they *want* to go?” she asked aloud, her words muffled as they echoed strangely in the cavernous chamber.

A sad memory of her father arose, of trying to feel his support and caring when she was upset. A very sensitive child, Susan had cried easily, and her father had been bothered and confused by her tears. A great chasm would erupt between them when she needed him the most. She knew that he shared her sensitive and passionate nature, which made the separation more painful and frustrating. Now sitting alone in the book cellar, Susan felt a sickening mixture of loss and guilt, a hollowed-out feeling in her chest, and a sinking in her belly.

Then her mind began to think—to analyze, defend, and construct. She could feel the tug-of-war as the mind and the emotions fought over the memory like bickering siblings or an old married couple.

“Should I divide the memory and let the emotions have one part and the intellect the other, like joint custody?” With this thought

she felt the twinge of a headache, the battleground of the two equally strong forces of mind and feeling.

16



“What if the memory is an entity unto itself, not thought or feeling but a separate, novel being that deserves my honoring? Maybe neither the mind nor emotion should lord over memory. Memory is a time traveler and a record keeper, never completely accurate to the intellect and ever morphing and shifting in the feeling mode. Memory will never satisfy the mind or the emotions completely.”

Waves of relief flooded her as she recognized the innate wisdom of her memory. At her realization her fingers unclenched, and the photos fell into her lap. Gathering up the memorabilia she carefully placed them in the book and slipped the thick, black tome back onto the shelf. By gently closing the volume containing the paper lantern, she extinguished its faint glow and placed it beside the memory book. Tentatively feeling her way in the inky dark, Susan climbed up the winding stairwell to tell Gricilis what she had discovered.