

## Vivette J. Kady / RETURN STROKE

One afternoon during a violent thunderstorm, while my grandmother washed dishes beneath the open kitchen window, lightning struck and her hands caught fire. She sprang away from the sink and stood gaping at her blazing hands until Uncle Hank, who had just come into the kitchen, grabbed a dishtowel and smothered the flames. "Oh my," Grandmother said.

I've invented the "Oh my," but she would have said that.

In her frequent retelling of this incident since its occurrence some thirty-five years ago, Grandmother has said she felt no real pain — just a quick mild burning sensation in the centres of both palms, and then a sort of tingling that spread up her arms and zapped her heart. Well, zapped is my word — she wouldn't say that.

The fire left no outward traces — no weals of scar tissue or scorched discoloured skin — but soon after she was struck by lightning my grandmother found she had developed a special "talent": she was able to dowse. It was as if the lightning had charged atoms in her body and somehow she was in alignment, in harmony, with the electromagnetic fields of this planet. She discovered her ability to divine the day after this incident, when she was clearing the yard of branches blown down by the storm. She picked up a forked branch and it dipped down, suddenly and forcefully, right over the septic tank.

Grandmother stopped dowsing a couple of years ago, but for more than three decades it was as if her heart, her soul, the entire constellation of molecules that form her could shrug loose and pierce the soil; slip through caves and rocks to deposits of metallic ores, or underground streams.

This became the single most important thing about her, more momentous than the births or deaths or anything else that had or

would happen in her life: a stroke of lightning had singled her out.

Grandmother lies in a rented hospital bed in Uncle Hank and his wife Ellie's house. On the bedside table are boxes of chocolates, an alarming assortment of pills, and the TV remote. She has no intention of leaving the bed. In the past few months she's lost first a toe, then a foot, and now her leg below the knee, to gangrene. "I am dying," she announced when told of the need for the latest amputation, as casually as she might say, "It's going to rain today." This was not for dramatic effect, or to elicit sympathy or denials — she merely wanted it acknowledged, up front, so we wouldn't have to skirt around it.

A board-like contraption has been rigged up under the covers to prevent the bedclothes from pressing down on the amputated stump. When the bed is cranked up, she uses the board as a table to play solitaire on, or a few hands of rummy when I visit. Her eyesight has become too weak for reading. She likes me to read the newspaper to her, from cover to cover. She wants to hear headlines, letters to the editor, birth and death notices, reports of business mergers. "Oh my," she says of government corruption, and she titters or gasps at scandals, a coy hand covering her mouth. I skip the more disastrous bits — famine, genocide, mayhem — hoping she won't notice. It sounds crazy, but I'm convinced she is abnormally affected by eruptions of violence, evil and tragedy — bad news is dangerous to her.

My grandmother is a rational woman, inclined toward the scientific rather than the metaphysical. She readily submitted to tests that measured changes in skin potential as she moved over subterranean water; she is familiar with studies suggesting possible detector sites in the human body for magnetic fields — the adrenal gland in the kidney region; the pineal gland at the base of the brain; the retinas of the eyes. She draws parallels between the navigational mechanisms of migratory birds and dowsers. She is adamant in her refusal to believe that what happened to her was a miracle — she will not be allied with paintings that wink or shed tears of blood. She has accepted her talent with the same matter-of-fact resignation she would have shown had she been born cross-eyed, or with twelve toes, or if she'd developed Tourette Syndrome.



I spent a fair amount of time with my grandmother while I was growing up, after my father died and my mother started dating again. I've watched her body react to hidden signals. I've been with her while she stood transformed, her atoms spinning in an irresistible dance with something beneath the surface.

Grandmother observed certain rituals when she dowsed. First she'd wash her hands in hot water, then take a few swigs of whisky-laced tea from the flask she kept with her. She has always suffered from poor circulation — blood moves sluggishly around her rotund body to her extremities — but she dowsed without gloves, even in cold weather, so she could feel the rod against her skin. Her fingers would be raw, numb with cold, yet the centres of her palms tingled as if their contact with the dowsing rod had reignited molecular memories of the lightning bolt. She favoured a y-stick cut from a willow. She'd stride off across fields in her thick cardigan and muddy boots, a woollen tuque pulled down over her ears, brandishing the y-stick like a tilted crucifix and moving as quickly as her short stout legs would allow. "The faster I move," she'd say, "the stronger the reaction."

These strong reactions were taxing — Grandmother has described the sensations as akin to a series of electric shocks sweeping across her body. She'd tremble with the chills; her teeth would chatter; fear would lurch and somersault in her stomach.

"Have another chocolate, go on," she says. "Do you know, even the police used me, to find bodies?"

I nod. "I remember." I was there, for the first body. Well, not exactly *there*, out with her when she found it, but I was there afterwards, when she came home. That was the summer my mother remarried, when I was fourteen.

"Nowadays they've got radar that can scan underground," she says. "I saw it on the television. They used it in the backyard of that horrible man — the one who kidnapped those children and took such dreadful photographs of them. But all they found buried in his garden were old cow bones."

"I wish you wouldn't watch stuff like that," I say.

“Not that I’d be much good anymore — they’d have to drag me around in a wheelchair. Now that would be a sight — imagine me bumping around out there, dangling my foot over scrub and mud. Go on, take another chocolate. Take a few.”

Finding the first body was an accident. Grandmother had been hired by a construction company to dowse for hidden service lines on a long-abandoned site near the outskirts of town. As she tramped over some muddy soil beneath a clump of trees, her y-stick twisted so violently the bark ripped off and tore the skin on her hands. When labourers from the construction company dug, they found the battered body of young Shannon Peterson. She’d been missing for three weeks, last seen leaving for softball practice at a park a few blocks from her home.

The gruesome discovery caused my grandmother to feel as if she’d arrived at the end of something; as if she’d slipped through the safety net of the world and was falling headlong, mouth open. This was the dark side of the gift — a startling, almost unknowable sorrow pulsed outward from her heart.

After this she began to move more cautiously over the earth, waiting for another shock or a fissure that might open up and swallow her. She pushed the terror deep inside and held it there. It has congealed into something wobbly and gelatinous — a bright, throbbing clot.

“While you’re here, would you mind helping me bathe her?”

Aunt Ellie fills an enamel basin with warm water, and hands me towels and soap.

“She hates this,” Aunt Ellie warns. “She’s as bashful as a young girl. But better you than Hank.”

We roll my grandmother onto her side, remove her nightgown, and slide a towel under her. She moans, and closes her watery eyes. I try not to look at the remains of her leg, the exposed stump. Aunt Ellie washes her face and neck, soaps her belly, the pink folds between her legs, her empty flapping breasts. We help her to sit upright. “Oh!” she whispers, and her lips contract, bluish, around the sound. I hold her while Aunt Ellie washes her back. Her crimped skin feels cold and loose. Aunt Ellie pats her dry, sprinkles her with powder, and



we help her into a clean nightgown.

"You smell nice," I tell her as I comb her hair. She keeps it bobbed short, parted on one side. It's hardly greying, but beginning to thin. Strands of hair fall and coil like dark pencilled arcs on her pillow. Specks of talcum powder and tiny flakes of skin fleck the pale blue sheets.

Ever since the lightning struck, atmospheric changes have affected Grandmother — the altitude and position of the sun; the strength and direction of the wind; the approach of storms. It was fine when she was doing run-of-the-mill dowsing for wells and tree roots, but once she began to look for bodies, her acute sensitivity extended beyond mere weather conditions. Now even distant events affect her. Misery blows through her, and as the television brings news of war, earthquakes, mutilations, her condition worsens.

I discuss this with Uncle Hank and Aunt Ellie. "You ought to install some sort of v-chip in that thing," I tell them. "Look how it's affecting her. She's disintegrating."

They exchange frowns.

Uncle Hank speaks carefully. "Any doctor will tell you — and she'd be the first to agree — there are perfectly reasonable explanations for her condition."

I know. Poor circulation, immobility, ulcerated flesh, putrefaction, amputation. Infection, amputation. And so on. Vision clouded — age-related. The bedridden have feelings of morbidity. These things happen.

But they cannot deny she has developed a highly unusual sensitivity to the world. Images of massacres in Algeria flicker across the TV screen, and my grandmother's limbs ache. Flood victims weep and her head throbs.

"Listen dear," Aunt Ellie says gently, "it's not good for you to be cooped up with an invalid. You're young. You should be out with people your own age."

"Your grandmother loves that TV," Uncle Hank says. "She likes to keep informed. Her mind's still sharp as a tack."

Grim self-sacrifice pinches the corners of Aunt Ellie's mouth. "Don't get me wrong — we love having you visit, but now's the time to

be enjoying your life."

"But I'm *happy* to be here," I protest, and leave the rest unsaid — *besides, she won't be around much longer.*

I do have a life beyond my deteriorating grandmother, and my aunt and uncle who've become impatient and exhausted from the demands of nursing her. I spend hours surrounded by — and in various degrees of contact with — strong, lithe, breathtakingly mobile bodies. We engage in tugs-of-war with gravity; we tease the limits of skin, muscle and air.

Alex could have used that in his documentary about me — tugs-of-war with gravity; teasing limits — although he probably would have said it was over-the-top. *Let your choreography speak for itself. Your dancing is so eloquent, you don't need words.*

I lived with Alex for almost two years. He took rolls of footage of me at rehearsals, on tour, in the park, shopping, cooking — Alex and his camera were everywhere. He had enormous energy — he hardly slept. If he wasn't filming or editing, he'd be baking bread, or taking his motorbike apart, or painting the walls, or speeding down the highway, or calling everyone he knew.

The final argument took place after he'd woken me at 3:00 a.m. to tell me the lighting designer was undermining my work with subliminal messages, and I had to get rid of him. A week earlier it had been one of the musicians.

"It's no good," I said. "I can't do this anymore."

When I came home from rehearsal that evening, I found Alex lying on his back on the futon with a clear plastic bag over his head, held tight around his neck with elastic bands. Beside the futon were a bottle of tequila and an empty pill container. The new Counting Crows was playing — we'd listened to it for the first time late one night that week with the lights out — but six discs were loaded in the magazine of the CD player. At the moment of his death, Alex could have heard the Brahms Violin Concerto, Tom Waits, Big Audio Dynamite, Cecilia Bartoli, or Ali Farka Toure.

There was no suicide note, but on the kitchen counter was a photograph he'd taken of me a few months earlier at a sidewalk sale — I'd tried on a pair of outrageous cat's eye sunglasses with fluores-



cent orange frames. Alex had cropped the photograph and mounted it on a sheet of rose-coloured cardboard. Diagonally across the cardboard he'd written: *last seen enjoying her illusions*.

That happened eight months ago. The aftershocks are unavoidable. All it takes is the scent of a particular shaving soap, or an inadvertent envelope addressed to the dead, shoved through the mail slot with bills and flyers and a card from mother, or some music first heard late with the lights out, and the ground threatens to break open.

In her dreams, my grandmother is falling. She jerks as she sleeps; little spasms shake her like jolts of electricity.

There is something about me that Grandmother and Uncle Hank and Aunt Ellie wouldn't want to know, although it's actually quite harmless, and perfectly safe. For the past few months I've been supplementing my income with phone sex. I have the perfect voice, and it's easy, once you get the hang of it. You can chop celery or sort laundry or do some basic stretches while they're jerking off on the other end of the line. You just have to remember to talk dirty from time to time — it's not hard to figure out what they want — and to keep moaning and breathing heavily. Most of my clients are repeats. Some want to meet me, but of course that's out of the question.

A man is setting up a telescope on the sidewalk diagonally opposite Uncle Hank and Aunt Ellie's house. It's an unusually cold night for the beginning of spring.

Grandmother watches news of oil spills, refugees, nuclear leaks, bombings. A female torso with surgically severed limbs stuffed in a bag near a railway line. Cult suicides, comet madness.

I turn off the TV. "Come outside with me. I want you to see the comet."

"I can't, dear," she says.

"It's perfect tonight — no clouds. There's a guy out there with a telescope. Come."

Uncle Hank helps me lift her into the wheelchair. We put a couple of thick socks on her foot, tuck blankets around her, muffle her with

scarf and hat and gloves.

I push her slowly down the front walk and steer her over to the man fiddling with his telescope. He looks quite young. He's wearing a beret and a leather jacket with the collar pulled up over his neck.

"Hi," I say. "Mind if we take a look through your telescope?"

"Sorry. I can't get the comet in focus. My hands are shaking too much — it's so cold." He speaks with an accent I can't place. "It's a delicate instrument."

"What a shame," Grandmother says.

"You can see without the telescope," and he points to it — clear and bright, its tail streaming upwards.

"My grandmother's eyesight's not good," I explain.

"Then we'll have to keep trying." He lowers the stand, crouches down, repositions the angle of the telescope, blows on his hands and rubs them together, makes minute adjustments to the eyepiece. "Okay," he says after a few minutes, "I have it." Little fires of exhilaration dance in his black eyes.

We maneuver the wheelchair so that Grandmother can have a look.

"Oh my — how wonderful!" she exclaims.

When I take my turn at the telescope, Grandmother says, "I've heard that every carbon atom inside each one of us comes from some distant star." After a few moments, she adds, "My granddaughter here is a dancer." She is gazing up, apparently transfixed by the vast, spinning night sky.

I laugh. "My grandmother here has a remarkable ability to navigate."

Aunt Ellie brings cups of hot tea after we get Grandmother back to bed.

"Perhaps that young man out there would like some tea to warm him up. I'd like a drop of whisky in mine, Ellie, for a nightcap. It was terribly cold outside."

"That'll be the day — not with all the medication you're taking," Aunt Ellie says. "You should rest when you finish your tea. Be sure you don't overdo it."

"Good heavens, I'll have more than enough rest when I'm dead. If



I had both legs, I'd go dancing." After Aunt Ellie has gone, she sighs and pats my hand. "A daughter-in-law is not the same as a daughter."

"Your hands feel warm tonight," I say. There are small clusters of blister-like eruptions in the centres of both palms. "How long have you had this rash?"

"I hadn't noticed. It must be a reaction to all these pills." She sips her tea and pulls a face. "Want to play a few hands of rummy before you go?"

I shuffle the cards.

"Remember how my hands caught fire, in a lightning storm?" she says. "Well, of course you couldn't *remember*, you weren't born yet. You know, lightning isn't just one single stroke that falls to earth and then that's over and done with. There's some give-and-take involved."

I begin to deal the cards. "What do you mean?"

"Well, apparently the thundercloud sends down negative charges, but before they reach the ground, opposite charges from houses or trees — or my soapy hands, for that matter — rush to meet them somewhere up there. You see, there's mutual attraction." She picks up her cards, sorts them. "All that energy and fury — the flash of light, the thunder — is really from what they call the return stroke, which goes back up to the cloud. It moves so quickly, we can't see it's actually rising, not falling." She picks up a card from the top of the pack and smiles.

I lower her bed, smooth the sheets, kiss her forehead. "So," Grandmother says, and blinks. Her eyes say the rest — *I am dying. Have another chocolate. Take two. Go on.*

When I close my eyes she is there, an after-image on the retinas.

My grandmother taught me never to bathe or use electric appliances during a thunderstorm. I will hang up the phone when there's lightning, even if my client is in the final throes of passion. If I'm caught outside in an electrical storm, I know not to shelter under a tree. I'll look for the lowest point and crouch, keeping both feet on the ground.