Bury Me in Satin

by

Seanan McGuire
"Daddy?"

Mary Dunlavy paused in the doorway to her father's room, peering into the dark and trying to convince herself that she heard any signs of life. Breathing, a heartbeat, anything that would tell her she wasn't alone in the house with a corpse. Which was a silly schoolgirl thing for her to be worried about, considering her own situation--but her situation was hers, and she'd been adjusting to it for the past three years. Her daddy was supposed to be different. He was supposed to live forever.

The old grandfather clock in the hall ticked over to the hour, beginning to chime. Still, there was no sound from her father's room. There hadn't been a sound in almost a week, not since the night he went to bed complaining about a pain in his chest and talking about the ticking in the walls. Mary hadn't been able to hear a thing, not then or now, but she hadn't heard the deathwatch beetles since the night before she'd died. That sort of omen was for the living. It wasn't meant for her.

Her sense of smell wasn't as good as it had been when she was alive, but it was good enough to pick up the faint touch of decay hanging in the cool hallway air. She knew what she would find if she went into that room, and that was why, in the end, she pulled the door closed and turned away. She wasn't ready.

He would wake up soon. He had to.

"Have you seen Benjamin Dunlavy recently?" Alexander shrugged out of his jacket, hanging it on the coat rack. "I ran into one of his coworkers from the mill during lunch today, and he expressed some concern."

"Why would he express concern to you?" asked Fran, looking openly bewildered. "It's not like the Dunlavys have us over for dinner on the regular. Sort of wish they would, though. Then we wouldn't be the ones doing the dishes."

"As if you've ever washed a dish in your life," said Alexander, laughing as he leaned over and kissed his daughter-in-law on the cheek. "You are an incorrigible slob. Motherhood has done nothing to redeem you."

"Never said it would," said Fran amiably. "Besides, I'm not on mama duty right now. Enid's got Alice out in the back. They're chasin' frickens through the tall grass. They've got a pickle jar, so there's no telling how many little hopping friends we're gonna have in here tonight."

"Good to know," said Alexander. "As for why they thought I'd know, there's your answer. It's common knowledge that Mary babysits for Alice from time to time, and I suppose they thought that meant we might have been in touch with the family. He hasn't been to work for the past week. They're concerned."

"Huh," said Fran. She paused before asking, more carefully, "Mary and Benjamin live alone these days, don't they?"

"Yes, since Mary's mother passed. That would have been five years ago? Six at the most. It was a tragedy. Christine was a truly lovely woman. Never had a hard word for anyone. She used to babysit for Jonathan, back when we first moved to town." They had been foreigners then, strangers to the township and to the country. Allowing Christine to take care of Jonathan had done a great deal to convince the people of Buckley that the newcomers from the United Kingdom meant no harm.
"I see," said Fran. "Maybe I should take Alice and some cookies or a pie or something, go over and check in on them."

"Would you?" Alexander didn't make any effort to conceal his relief. "It's less intrusive if you happen to drop by. You could ask about Mary's availability this weekend. I know Johnny wants to go out and have a look at the bloodworm burrows before they finish coming out of hibernation, and you could go with him if Mary took Alice."

"I'll go with him anyway, as you darn well know, but I'm still happy to go check on them. Mary's a good girl. Lots of girls drop out of high school--usually for some boy or other--and she's the only one I know who dropped out because her daddy needed her." Most families, she would have been a little bit uncomfortable about that situation. People talked, after all, even if they never quite wanted to admit what they were talking about. Benjamin Dunlavy, however, was a widower, and a hard worker who just needed someone to be home to put dinner on the table and keep the windows from turning entirely black with grime. Fran had never gotten so much as a whiff of anything improper off of him, and she doubted that she ever would.

"Thank you," said Alexander, and kissed her cheek again. Fran grinned, and said nothing. She really didn't think that it was necessary.

It had taken about an hour, all told, to get ready to go. First she had to change her clothes, since bloodstained trousers weren't even remotely suitable for a social visit. Then she had to raid the kitchen for cookies. Fortunately, Enid had baked a batch of peanut butter with walnuts and protective runes the night before, and Fran didn't figure anyone would miss half a dozen. Heck, that was the damage every time Johnny wandered through the kitchen after cookie night.

Finally, she had to voyage into the tangled wilds of the field behind the house, where she followed the sound of Alice's giddy shrieks to the place where her mother-in-law--normally a calm, dignified woman--was down on her hands and knees, watching raptly as Alice chased after a small green frog with short, stubby feathers on its front legs. The fricken hopped, spreading its feathered legs in an attempt to fly. Alice lunged for it, narrowly missing as the fricken caught a fortunate gust of air and managed to glide just out of her reach.

Alice would have pursued her amphibious quarry, but was stopped by her mother's arm being suddenly wrapped around her waist, lifting her off the ground. As she had been taught, Alice froze, sniffed the air to verify the scent of her mother's perfume, and pushed once against Fran's arm to check that it had the normal texture and heat of human flesh. Then she laughed, going from dismay to delight in the twinkling of an eye, and twisted around to fling her own arms around Fran's neck, with a gleeful cry of "Mama!"

"Hello, jumpin' bean," said Fran genially, looking over her little girl's head to Enid, who was picking herself up from the ground. "Having fun?"

"We caught frickeys, Mama!" proclaimed Alice, pulling her mother's attention back to her. "They're in the big jar. Can I keep them always?"

"Well, no," said Fran. "You can keep them for tonight, but tomorrow morning, we gotta put them back where they came from. Think of all the fricken mamas and daddies out there, wondering where their babies are at! They can have a sleepover without worryin' their parents overmuch, and I guess when you're a fricken parent, you get used to the idea of your babies havin' sleepovers with little girls, safe on the inside of big glass jars."

"But for tonight?" asked Alice hopefully.
Fran looked over her daughter's head and rolled her eyes. Enid put one dirty hand across her mouth, smothering a smile. "Yes, you can keep them for tonight," said Fran. "But right now, I need to take you inside and wash some of the muck off you so's Mary will know that you're a little girl, and not a swamp monster."

"Mary!" cried Alice gleefully. Then she paused, leaning back in her mother's arms and giving her a mistrustful look. "Why're we seeing Mary? Don't go away, Mama, you just got here."

"We're just going for a visit, that's all," said Fran reassuringly, unable to stop the pang of guilt that formed in her throat. True, she and Jonathan had been away for a few weeks to watch the jackalope migration, and there had been the peace conference with the gorgons in Chicago before that, but she hadn't really been away that much, had she? Thinking back over the past few months, she was mortified to realize she'd been gone for six weeks since the New Year--and since it was only March, that wasn't a good thing.

Privately, Fran vowed to do better, to be home more, to tell Johnny that she wasn't coming the next time he got called out of town by this problem or that. Even more privately, she knew that she would never pass up a chance for adventure, especially not when Alice had two wonderful grandparents and a beloved babysitter who might as well have been family to take care of her. She just wasn't made to say "no" when the call came. For better or for worse, that wasn't the woman she was.

"Okay, Mama," said Alice, and squirmed to get down. Fran set her on the ground and watched as she ran off toward the house.

"They grow up fast," said Enid, pulling Fran's attention back to her. She smiled a little, understanding and sad. "Seems like you blink and they're asking you where you keep the knives, and how much pressure it takes to open a man's throat. She'll miss you more as she gets older."

"I know, but what am I supposed to do?" Fran shook her head. "Johnny has all these people asking him for help, and some of them have started asking me. Arturo's wife is expecting this summer. She doesn't want to have her baby surrounded by wise guys and snake people, and I'm the only person she knows to call."

"So ask the snake people if they'd mind you bringing a little girl on a special vacation," said Enid. "You know they'd be happy to put her up, and you know Alice would love to meet some real, live gorgons like the ones she's seen in her Grandpa's books."

Fran opened her mouth to answer, and then paused, giving Enid a narrow-eyed look. "Why're you pushing this? You've been gettin' more and more enthusiastic about us taking Alice places, even when they're not such good places for a little girl to go."

"I only encourage you to take her places where I know you have allies and she won't be harmed," said Enid. "She's growing up, Fran. She needs to meet the people she'll be working with for the rest of her life."

Fran paused. Then, slowly, she nodded. "You make a good point. I'll see about convincing Johnny to let her come with us this summer."

Enid smiled. "That's all I wanted. Why are you going to visit Mary?"

"Oh, Alex said some fellas from the mill were askin' about Benjamin Dunlavy--he missed work, or somethin' like that--and he asked me to go by, see if everything was all right. Nothing big." Fran shrugged. "He probably just has a spring cold or somethin'. I'm bringing some cookies, and Alice, of course. She could brighten a dead man's day."
"Yes, she could," agreed Enid.

"Back in a bit," said Fran, amiably enough, and turned to trot after her daughter. Enid stayed where she was, watching Fran walk away. She'd been expecting more of a fight on the topic of taking Alice to Chicago with them--but then, why would Fran have felt the need to argue? Fran had grown up with the carnival. She'd chosen to live that life because she loved it, and when she'd found another life that she loved just as much, she'd changed her goals to suit that new life. For her, teaching Alice to love the world that she was being raised in was only natural. And it wasn't like keeping Alice in Buckley would protect her. Heloise Tapper--may she burn in whatever Hell was intended for her ilk--had been proof enough of that.

Johnny would resist more, Enid was sure. He was protective where his daughter was concerned, which made sense, given Daniel, and given what had happened in Gentling. He'd want to keep Alice far away from anything that could hurt her, even if those things could also help her; could be friends and allies and people who would understand the world she'd grown up in when no one else would. If there was anything Enid felt bad about, it was that. They were essentially giving Alice a Covenant upbringing, just like the one they'd given Johnny. It was the only kind of way she or Alex knew to raise a child...but a proper Covenant upbringing would have meant other children, if they'd been doing it back in England. It would have meant school with boys and girls her own age, people she could talk to, people who would understand.

They couldn't give Alice the childhood she should have had, but they could do their very best to make sure that someday, when she grew up, she was positioned to make her way in the world without fear that no one would ever understand her.

Enid bent, picked up the pickle jar of frickeys from where it lay discarded among the weeds, and began, finally, walking toward the house. The future was a problem for tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that. All she really had to do, as a grandmother and a human being, was make sure that little girl had the best childhood she could possibly have. Enid was confident that someday, when Alice looked back, she would see how much effort had been made on her behalf, and she would forgive them.

The trouble with driving Alexander's old rattle-trap of a pickup truck around town was that everyone knew exactly where you were going and what your business was. Heads turned as Fran went rumbling past with Alice in the seat beside her, and more and more, Fran came to understand the wisdom of sending the pair of them to check on the Dunlavys. Mary sat for Alice often enough that Fran dropping by with the little girl wouldn't mean involving the whole township in her business, or her father's. Anything else, well. Buckley had its share of gossips and busybodies, and Fran didn't trust any of them as far as she could throw them. She'd defend them if she had to. She'd die for them if circumstance demanded. But they couldn't make her like them.

Benjamin's car--only slightly newer than Alexander's truck, and in considerably poorer repair, with rust spots eating near all the way down to the frame in places--was parked in the drive when Fran pulled up in front of the house. She got out of the truck and walked around to let Alice out as well.

"You want to pass me the cookies, bean?" she asked. Alice handed her the plate. Fran took it in one hand, and helped her daughter down with the other. "Remember, social calls always go better when you bring baked goods and a big smile, even if you have to spend the whole visit lying through your teeth."

"How do you lie through your teeth, Mama?" asked Alice.
Fran laughed. "Don't worry, sweetie. You live in this town long enough, I'm sure you'll get the knack."

They walked up the narrow path to the door, Alice leading the way in her exuberance, Fran moving more slowly, taking time to consider the condition of the house itself. The paint was peeling, and while the windows were spotlessly clear, there was no disguising how damaged the shutters were, or how frayed the curtains had become. The house had been crumbling ever since Christine Dunlavys had died, leaving her teenage daughter and her heartbroken husband alone. Benjamin had thrown himself into his work, and while Fran had seen firsthand just how much effort Mary had put into maintaining the property, the girl could never have accomplished everything on her own. She simply didn't know how.

We should have offered to help, Fran thought, feeling mildly ashamed. She'd always known that the Dunlavys were in a tight spot, but she'd never really tried to reach out, had she? Aside from the occasional friendly casserole, and hiring Mary to sit for Alice, that was—and Mary wouldn't have needed to take on babysitting work if money hadn't been so tight. Fran had always been grateful for Mary's easy availability. Now, for the first time, she found herself feeling guilty that she hadn't questioned that availability more.

Alice bounced onto her toes when she reached the porch, stretching upward in an effort to ring the doorbell. She was still tiny enough to fall several feet short of her goal. Fran chuckled, pushing dark thoughts of failure and lack of charity aside, and rang the bell herself.

Seconds slithered by unmarked, until Fran frowned and rang the bell again. She left her finger on the buzzer a little longer this time, until she was sure that anyone inside would have heard it. Then she stepped back, putting her free hand on Alice's shoulder, and listened for the sound of footsteps.

It never came. Instead, the doorknob turned and the door swung open and Mary was standing there, looking pale and drawn. She was wearing her Buckley High School jacket again—she was wearing that jacket almost every time Fran saw her, even in the middle of summer and the dead of night. It was a reasonable fashion accessory for a teenage girl, but an odd choice for some of the occasions Mary wore it on. All that flicked through Fran's mind at high speed as Alice cried, "Mary!" and ducked under her mother's hands, stepping forward to meet her favorite babysitter.

Then Alice cried out, the high, confused sound of a child who has no frame of reference for what she's experiencing, and fell back against Fran's legs, shooting a betrayed look at Mary. The smell that was rolling out of the open door hit Fran a second later. It was deep and rank and terrible, the smell of something that had been dead for so long that it no longer remembered being anything else. It was a smell with teeth, and Fran took a step back, trying to get away from it.

Mary was still standing in the doorway, still pale and sad-looking. She wasn't reacting to the smell at all. She didn't even seem to realize that it was there.

Fran forced herself to stop moving back. She put a hand on Alice's head, trying to comfort her daughter, who was now burying her face against her mother's legs, body rigid with indignation and surprised fear. A smell like that never meant anything good, and a little girl like Alice, who had grown up in a house full of hunters and taxidermy, knew that when something smelled as dead as that, the appropriate response was to turn and run the other way.

"Mary, sweetie, is everything all right?" The words sounded like they were made of glass, pretty and fragile and virtually meaningless. Fran almost thought she could hear them shatter as they fell. "Some of the men from the mill were asking about your daddy, and I thought, well, if he's feeling poorly, some of my mother-in-law's famous peanut butter cookies will fix him right up. She puts walnuts in the dough, that's her secret. Well, it's not much of a secret, really, anyone who takes a bite knows straight off that she's put walnuts in there. Point is, they're delicious, and they can make just about anybody feel better."

"Everything's fine, Mrs. Healy," said Mary. Her voice was as pale and washed-away as her face.
Combined with the smell that was still drifting out of the house...Fran was starting to be genuinely afraid, although she couldn't have put into words just why. Not yet. "Thank you for the cookies. I'll put them in the kitchen for when daddy wakes up. He hasn't been to work in a few days, and I guess I just forgot to call and tell them he was under the weather."

"Mary, honey, forgive me for saying this, but if your daddy isn't feeling well, that may be partially because of the smell that's coming from inside. Now, I'm not one to criticize another woman's housekeeping, but is it possible that somethin' may have crawled into your chimney? Somethin' sort of...bigger, maybe? Like a raccoon? Or a whole family of raccoons?"

"It smells dead, Mama, it smells like dead," complained Alice, her voice muffled by Fran's legs. Fran gave her head another pat and tried to force a smile.

"I don't smell anything, Mrs. Healy," said Mary. "Is it possible that your nose is just extra sensitive today?"

"I suppose that's possible," said Fran slowly, even though she knew it wasn't. Good manners said that she shouldn't press the issue. Good manners were an excellent way for people to get themselves killed. "Alice, sweetie, if you could let go of me for just one second, I can give Mary these cookies, and we can be on our way."

"Don't wanna go in the house, the house smells like dead," said Alice, letting go of her mother's legs and looking mistrustfully back toward the open doorway. Mary blinked, expression turning hurt. Alice was too young for such subtleties. She just ran behind Fran's legs, hiding her face once more.

"You don't have to go inside, honey, but if you don't want to get closer to the smell, you need to let me go. I have to go back to the porch to give Mary her cookies." And to get another whiff of that smell. It was bad even as far back as they had moved, but there were subtleties to it that Fran was sure she was missing. If something awful had taken up residence in the Dunlavys's attic, she needed to know what it was before she could work out how to kill it.

Alice, sniffling, let go of Fran's legs. Fran took a deep breath of the somewhat less rank air before walking back to the porch and holding out the plate of cookies to Mary.

"I hope your daddy feels better real soon," said Fran.

"Thank you," said Mary, and took the plate. She even held it for a second, before it passed through her semi-substantial fingers and shattered on the brick step. Mary jumped, clapping a hand over her mouth. Fran stared, first at the mess, and then at the girl standing in front of her.

"I think I ought to come inside now, Mary, if you don't mind," said Fran, in a still, calm voice. "I think I need to see your father."

Mary, mutely, nodded.

Alice had refused to come into the house, and in the end, Fran thought that very well might be for the best. She had settled the little girl in the cab of the truck with her crayons and some butcher paper. She'd get an earful about that later from Jonathan, who seemed to think that Alice should be under constant supervision to keep her from setting herself on fire or something ridiculous like that, but in the meanwhile, Alice would be safe, and whatever was causing that smell wouldn't haunt her dreams for the next few years.

Fran was grimly afraid that she knew what was causing that smell. She wasn't sure whether she hoped
she was right or hoped she was wrong, but as she stepped over the shattered plate and broken cookies now littering the porch, she knew that one way or the other, things were going to change for good as soon as she had her answers.

The smell was even stronger inside the house. Fran pulled her shirt up over her nose and mouth, trying to filter it just a little, just enough that she could keep breathing. Mary followed her as she walked deeper. The girl was wringing her hands like she was afraid of getting in trouble. What little coloring she possessed had drained out of her face, and for the first time in a long while, Fran found herself really looking at Alice's babysitter. Had Mary's hair always been so white? It seemed almost indecent on someone so young. And her eyes...hadn't they been blue, once? Now, looking into Mary's eyes was like looking at a hundred miles of empty highway, and the crossroads that stood at the end of every long road. There was something wrong with Mary's eyes. Something Fran didn't know how to define or to describe, but that she couldn't stop herself from seeing, now that she had finally started to look.

Mary didn't say anything, and so neither did Fran, and they walked deeper into the house, until they were standing outside a closed door, and the smell was so strong that it seemed to have a physical presence in the hall--a stronger presence than Mary did.

"Is this your father's door?" asked Fran, voice muffled by her shirt.

Mary nodded mutely.

Fran raised her free hand and knocked. She didn't really expect a response, and found that she was both relieved and disappointed when she didn't receive one. This would have been so much easier if Benjamin had still been alive.

The seconds crept by, moving slowly in the stagnant air. Fran knocked again. Still there was no reply.

"I'm going to open this door now, Mary," said Fran. She let her shirt fall away from her face. It wasn't really doing any good, and she was going to need both hands free for whatever was going to happen next. "Do you know anything about what I'm going to find on the other side?"

"Daddy's sleeping, that's all," said Mary. There was a pleading note in her voice, and an even stronger plea in her gray highway eyes. Please don't, it said. Please don't open that door.

"Honey, I don't think you can call what he's doing sleepin'," said Fran, and turned the knob, pushing it gently inward.

The room was dim, but there was enough light coming in through the curtains to let her see the bed, and what it contained. The smell barely registered in the face of her sorrow, which was brief and surprisingly powerful--and why shouldn't it be? She wasn't just mourning for the man. She was mourning, however belatedly, for the teenage girl in front of her, the one who should have worn a wedding veil long before she wore a burial shroud.

Fran shut the door, pulling until she felt the latch click home. "All right, Mary," she said. "Let's go outside."

Silently, Mary nodded.

Coaxing Alice out of the truck had proven easy, once Fran promised that they'd be going to the backyard, and not into the house. Mary had a sandbox, after all, built for her by her father when she was much younger. Alice had spent quite a few afternoons there, building herself crumbling castles and populating them with people made of grass and twigs. She threw herself into the sand as soon as she
saw that the grownups were just planning to sit on the back porch and not have any fun at all. In short order, she was sunk in her private fantasy land, leaving Fran and Mary to talk in relative privacy.

Mary said nothing at first. She sat on the bottom step, her hands clasped together on her knees and her eyes cast downward, like she was afraid that looking at Fran would start something that she didn't know how to stop.

It was really a pity that whatever it was had been started a long time ago. "When did it happen?" asked Fran gently.

"I don't know what you mean," said Mary, to her hands.

"I think you do, or you'd be lookin' at me right now," said Fran. "Honey, I know this is hard, but I need to know. When did it happen?"

"What?" Mary finally raised her head and looked Fran in the eye. That old, empty highway was still there, and Fran cursed herself for a fool for not having seen it before. But then, to be fair, the questions you asked a babysitter were things like "Do you have a boyfriend?" and "How much do you charge per hour?"

"Are you dead?" had never occurred to any of them.

Fran sighed. "When did you die, Mary? How long ago?"

"Oh." Mary looked down again. "1939. A couple of months before I started sitting for Alice, actually. The flyer that I put up at the library, I'd made that before the accident. So when the phone rang, and it was Mr. Healy, I just sort of...I said yes because that's what you do. Someone offers you a babysitting job, you say yes, unless you've got a date you can't cancel. And I didn't go out with boys, not like that. Daddy needed me here. He always needed me to be here."

"Mary, honey. It's 1942 now. You're talking about three years."

"So?" Mary looked up again. This time, there was actual anger in her expression, and a thin, hard line had appeared between her eyebrows. "When my mother died, I promised my father that I'd take care of him. I said I'd make sure he was fed, and keep the house just as neat as she did, and help him keep on living. I made a promise. I didn't get to break my word just because I went and--" She stopped, as suddenly as if she had inhaled a bug. In her lap, her hands clenched just a little more tightly, knuckles going white.

"You died," said Fran. "You died, and honey, that is a good enough reason to break a promise. The dead aren't required to keep promises to the living. If they were, nobody would ever get to go on to their eternal rest, and we'd have ghosts everywhere we looked. I think we'd run out of room before too long, with as many people as live and die every day. Your daddy would've understood."

"No, he wouldn't," said Mary. She gave a fierce little shake of her head. "Sometimes I think I didn't really die. Sometimes I think this is all just a...a really strange dream, you know? Because they never did find my body. If I hadn't come back, if I hadn't kept my word, he would never have known what happened to me. I would've just disappeared. How could I do that to him? He's my daddy. I love him."

"And honey, I'm sure he loved you, very much. But did you ever tell him?"

"Tell him what?" asked Mary. Her eyes were wide and guileless.

Fran's heart gave a lurch. The girl really didn't understand. "That you were dead. Did you ever tell him?"
"No." Mary looked back down at her hands. "I figured it would just have upset him, and it didn't seem to matter any. I ate less, was all. That was a good thing. Money was always pretty tight, and he didn't seem to notice that I was just pushing food around my plate and then putting it away for his lunch the next day."

"I see." Fran paused. "Honey, I have to ask. Please understand that I don't mean nothin' by it, it's just...some ghosts, they gotta eat things if they want to stay on this plane of existence. Breath, or time, or blood. Did you...are you the kind of ghost who...?"

"What?" Mary's head snapped back up. "No! I never hurt my daddy, and I never hurt Alice, either! I loved that baby as much as anyone's ever loved a little girl, I swear. You can ask her. She'll tell you I didn't lay one finger on her, not ever."

"I believe you." Fran glanced past Mary to the sandbox where Alice was constructing her castle. She smiled a little. She couldn't help it. Something about the serious set of Alice's shoulders, the way she addressed her construction, like it was the most important thing in the world, it just brought joy to a mother's heart. "I don't think Alice would've been so glad to come and see you if you'd been doing anything to cause her harm. But you understand why I had to ask."

"I do," admitted Mary. "I'd be worried too, if it were my little girl."

She went quiet then, and Fran was quiet as well, both of them considering the enormity of all the things that Mary would never have for her own. There would be no little girls for Mary Dunlavy; no little boys either, no babies in bassinets or bellies filled with lives yet to be. She had already missed her high school graduation--and worse, somehow, her own funeral. No funeral without a body. She'd miss her wedding, and her old age, and everything else she should have had. Everything else she'd been promised.

"It's not fair," said Fran.

Mary, who agreed with her, didn't say anything. It seemed like there was nothing she could say.

"Are you sure about this?" asked Mary, for the eleventh time. She had fuzzed out three times during the drive to the Healy house, turning translucent, and once passing all the way through the cab of the truck, so that Fran had been forced to back up and stop to let Mary climb back in. Alice had just laughed at the sight of her babysitter sliding through metal like breeze blowing through a screen. If there'd been any question left in Mary's mind about what kind of family she'd been sitting for all this time, it would have been answered by Alice's laughter.

"Yes, I'm sure," said Fran. She pulled the truck into the driveway and turned off the engine. "I need someone to watch over Alice if I'm going to take you off to find your body, and I need to tell Alexander to drop by your place and discover that your daddy's..." She stopped herself, seeing the look on Mary's face. "He needs to go by your place and start the process of making things right, is all."

"Will people think I hurt him?"

"No, honey. They won't think that at all. They may think he got real sad after you ran off, and that the sadness made him more susceptible to passing on quietly in his sleep, but they won't think you killed your father. There's nothing about his body to make them think that."

"I didn't run off," protested Mary.

"I know you didn't. But you haven't been living there in a long time, and when the police go over the
place, they'll see that." Dusty shelves in Mary's closet; dust on the yearbooks on her dresser. She'd been scrupulous about keeping the rest of the house in shape, but her own room had been neglected as unimportant. What need did a ghost have for sweet-smelling sheets, or for clean towels? All she'd needed was someone to haunt, and she'd haunted him with the very best of intentions, and with love.

Everyone who earned a haunting should be so lucky.

Mary continued to look uncertain as Fran opened her door, climbed out, and reached back in for Alice, who willingly let herself be gathered into her mother's arms. "Come on, girl. No one here's going to bite you, not even a little bit."

"That's not what I was worried about," said Mary, and finally climbed down out of the truck. She opened the door, Fran noted, and closed it behind her. It was going to take that girl a while to get used to the realities of her condition. Fran found herself wondering whether there were classes on ghosting that Mary could take, phantom schoolrooms filled with poltergeists and specters who would teach her the finer points of the disembodied state.

"What then, exorcism? We're not that kind of family." Fran turned to walk toward the house, leaving Mary staring uncertainly after her. Finally, lacking anything else to do, she followed.

The Healy house was the stuff of legend around town. Big, solid, well-maintained, and yet no one in Buckley could rightly say that they'd ever been inside. Even on Halloween, the Healys set up at the end of their driveway, handing out candy from what was essentially a glorified, pumpkin-covered lemonade stand. The windows were always covered by curtains, and even the most determined of busybodies had found themselves cut off at the pass when they tried to get past the porch. People mostly blamed it on the Healy's being foreign, and said that things would likely be different when Alexander and Enid got too old to run the household. Jonathan had grown up in Buckley. He'd no doubt be friendlier than his parents.

But maybe not. Maybe there was a reason for their privacy, something that had nothing to do with accents or places of birth. Mary stepped up onto the porch, fighting both to keep herself from gawking, and to keep herself from going insubstantial and plummeting straight down into the basement.

Fran shot her a kindly look. "It's all right, really," she said, and opened the front door.

No hellfire billowed out to consume them; no monsters poured through to swallow their souls. Instead, the open door revealed the bottom of a curved stairway, and a weathered hardwood floor softened by the long red runner of an imported throw rug. Alice squirmed in Fran's arms. Fran put her down, and the little girl raced into the house like she wasn't stepping on what was, for most of the children in Buckley, utterly forbidden ground.

"Now I haven't done much like this before," said Fran. "I married into this life, I wasn't raised to it, so please forgive me for needing to ask, but you're not going to haunt us from now on just because I'm inviting you in, are you? I wouldn't mind a ghost around the place, and we could definitely use the help with childcare, but there's some stuff that goes on that I don't really want to think about you seeing."

"Like...murder?" asked Mary, voice trembling a little.

Fran stared at her before saying, very slowly and clearly, "No, like sex. I'm a married woman. Murder is messy, but sex is private."

"Oh," said Mary, cheeks turning red. It was an impressive sight, her being dead and all. Fran wasn't sure how a ghost could blush—but then, how did a ghost do anything at all? How did a ghost walk, and talk, and take up space in the world? It seemed like an awfully big question, which meant that it was probably best left for somebody who asked awfully big questions for fun.
"Come on now," said Fran. "You get to talk to my father-in-law."

Walking through the Healy house felt unreal and strange, like some sort of flashback to the dares that Mary and her friends used to give each other when they were in their first year of high school and still believed that the world knew the meaning of "mercy." They'd challenged each other to go into graveyards and skirt the edges of the swamp, to run by the lakeside when the marsh lights appeared in the fog, and generally to dare the universe to punish them for their boldness. And it never had. Again and again, the town that had killed so many of their classmates had let them go.

At least until the night Mary had walked home from a babysitting job on Old Logger's Road, and hadn't made it any farther than the cornfields outside of town. On that night, she had paid for all the near misses and miraculous escapes she and her friends had made across the years, and she had paid so dearly that their ledger was cleared in full.

The foyer was almost normal, with pictures hanging on the wall and an umbrella stand next to the door. But there were swords and pole arms and even what looked like a longbow mixed in with the umbrellas, and the customary horseshoe above the door had been joined by several bundles of herbs and a string of garlic. Through the open door into what must have been the parlor, Mary could see glass-fronted cabinets and some truly unnerving taxidermy. She wasn't sure bears were supposed to have that many arms. She definitely didn't want to meet one that did.

"All right, Alice went up to talk to the mice, so she'll be in her room. Alexander was the one who told me to come check on you in the first place, and he didn't have a hunting trip planned for tonight, so this time of day he should be...this way. Come on, Mary, you don't get to dawdle just because you're dead." Fran turned right, heading down the hall.

Mary, who was still trying to come to terms with the six-armed bear, tore her eyes away from the taxidermy and followed.

The hall gave way to a blessedly normal-looking kitchen, with linoleum on the floor and fresh paint on the walls. Alexander Healy, who Mary mostly knew from the days when she'd still felt comfortable visiting the town library, was sitting at the table with a mug of tea and a large, leather-bound journal. His head was bowed, and his hand moved across the paper in quick, practiced arcs.

Fran stopped in the kitchen doorway and cleared her throat. "Afternoon. We've got company."

"Company?" Alexander raised his head, blinking in bemusement. Then he saw Mary, and his eyes widened. "Mary. I...see."

"No, you don't, I'm afraid; neither did I, until there was a little incident with the cookies," said Fran. "She's dead."

"Um, hi," said Mary.

Alexander went very still. Then he glanced to the window. Noting that the sun was still well above the horizon, he relaxed ever so marginally before turning back to Mary. He gave her an assessing look, careful to avoid her eyes until the last. Then he met them, and his shoulders sagged.

"Crossroads ghost," he said. "Oh, Mary, my dear, I'm so very sorry. Is that why your father has been missing work this past week?"

"No," said Mary. "I mean, not really. I mean, I didn't die that recently. I mean..." She stopped, looking to Fran for help.
"She means she's been dead since 1939, and none of us noticed, because she was going about her business like nothing had changed," said Fran. "Her father's been missing work because he passed away, and Mary here just kept waiting for him to wake up."

"Oh, Mary," said Alexander again, this time more softly, more sadly. "Not everyone who dies comes back. Most don't, in fact. It's only when a person feels they've left things undone that they're sure to rise. Did your father... was he aware of your condition?"

Mary almost burst out laughing. The way he said "condition" reminded her all too clearly of the way the teachers back at school had talked about one of the senior girls when she'd gotten herself into trouble with her boyfriend. The girl had been sent away to stay with relatives somewhere in Ohio, and the boy had been packed off to join the Army. Neither of them had ever come back to Buckley.

Then again, maybe catching dead was a little bit like catching pregnant. No one wanted to use the word. You didn't get to do the things you used to do anymore, no matter how much you enjoyed them. Your life, as you had always known it, was over. One way or the other, it was over.

"He didn't know," Mary said. "Nothing really changed, so I figured telling him wouldn't be fair. It wasn't like he could bring me back just by being mad at the car that killed me."

"So he probably thought that when he died, you'd get on with your life. Find a job, find a husband, move on. He was freeing you, Mary." Alexander rose slowly. Then he just stood there, his hands dangling at his sides, looking like he didn't know what to do next. "I'm sure he loved you very much. I'm very sorry for your loss."

"Don't you love how he just glossed over the part where you've been dead and babysitting for Alice this whole time?" asked Fran. "It's like he doesn't care that I've been handing his grandbaby off to a ghost at least three times a month for basically her entire life."

"Honestly, I'm still a little shocked that you weren't more upset," said Mary.

"Oh, I was. Still am, really," said Fran. "But Alice has always adored you, and she's a pretty good judge of character. It'd just upset her if I went and tried to lay you to rest, and you're a nice girl. A little deader than I might like, but that's not your fault."

"Oh," said Mary. She wasn't sure what else to say.

Fortunately for her, Fran had never been one to have trouble filling a silence. "Mary's body was never found, which is why she's been able to haunt her own house this long without anyone catching on. Can you call the police and come up with some excuse for why you dropped by the Dunlavy house? Benjamin's been dead long enough that it's past time for him to get buried."

"I can do that," said Alexander. "What about Mary? Did anyone see you driving away from the house with her? I don't want to deal with the police coming here and asking why you were seen smuggling a dead man's daughter away. Especially not when the daughter in question is also dead."

"I watched the windows as we were pulling out. Not a curtain was stirring, and I took back roads all the way home. Her room's so full of dust that it's pretty clear she hasn't been living there for a very long time. I think that'll throw off anyone who wants to start looking, and it's not like there's going to be any proof that she was ever here, what with her not being alive and all."

"I suppose that's true," said Alexander. "What will you be doing while I deal with the police?"

Fran smiled sunnily. "Finding her body and making sure she gets a decent burial, of course."

Somehow, Alexander managed not to groan.
It was a pretty simple plan, if you were the sort of person who thought plans like this made any sense at all. Alexander had gone back to the Dunlavy house, intending to call the police from the payphone down the street, so that he wouldn't have to go inside. Fran had called her husband home from the library, and he was watching Alice while his wife and his mother took Mary down to Old Logger's Road to search for the place where she'd been hit.

It was a pretty simple plan, and Mary was pretty sure that it proved the Healys were, as a group, completely out of their minds.

"I just don't understand," she said, as they hiked across the fields separating Mill Road, where the house was, from Old Logger's Road, where she'd been killed. It was a little over a mile, all told, but it seemed longer, in part because they were wading through waist-high sticker bushes and brambles. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because it's polite, dear," said Enid. "You've always been an excellent babysitter, and it's not nice to leave your babysitters to lay in unmarked graves by the side of the road."

"Nope, you put 'em in unmarked graves in the backyard, so you'll always know where to find 'em," said Fran, far too cheerfully for the circumstances.

Enid rolled her eyes, but didn't say anything. Mary just kept trudging along, the briars grabbing at her legs and feet the same as they did the living. There was something uncomfortable about that, like the girl was violating the laws of nature by obeying them.

"You died by the road, dear?" said Enid.

Mary nodded. "A car just came up out of nowhere and hit me." She could still remember the lights, bright moons against the darkness, coming so fast that she hadn't had the opportunity to jump out of the way. If there was one moment she wished she could take back, it was that one. If she'd jumped just that little bit quicker...Mary shook off the regrets of the past, and said, "It knocked me into the corn. We were coming on harvest, and there's that big old field near the old Parrish Place, the one nobody picks from anymore. Kids back at school always said that it was haunted." The words seemed to startle her. She laughed.

"What's so funny?" asked Fran.

"If it was haunted, I sure didn't notice. I just got out of there as fast as I could, because I was scared. But I was haunting the field while I was there, wasn't I? I've been haunting everything I touched for these last three years."

Enid patted Mary reassuringly on the shoulder. "I'm sure you did an excellent job of haunting the place, and I'm sure you'll do an even better job of haunting our back field."

Mary gave her a sidelong look. "Aren't you worried about somebody digging the place up and finding my body and deciding that you murdered me?"

Fran actually burst out laughing at that. "Mary, nobody is going to dig up our field. You think anyone in this town wants to know what they would find there?"

Much as it pained her, Mary had to admit that the older woman was right. Everyone knew that the Healys went into the woods and swamp of their own free will, and that whatever it was they did there, it kept the town safer than it would have been otherwise. It was part of why they were tolerated, despite
three of the four having come from parts unknown--which should have made them social outcasts, not interesting conversation pieces. Why, Enid had been seen covered in blood and standing on the lakeshore more than once, and the Friends of the Library had never so much as said boo. If you wanted to hide a body in Buckley, you could do a lot worse than burying it in the backyard of the Healy place.

"Hush, you two," said Enid. "We're here." They had reached the end of the field, and with it, Old Logger's Road.

The road--which barely deserved the name, being only semi-paved, and pitted with potholes that no one had gotten around to patching in the last ten years--stretched out in front of them, running away from town and into the deep woods. The driveway of the Old Parrish Place snaked out of the overgrown fields a hundred yards or so up the way, creating a makeshift crossroads.

Mary looked at that crossing and went pale. Not just pale: insubstantial. She seemed to fade out until Enid could see the waving grass and thorn bushes right through what should have been the girl's body.

"Mary?" she asked, as gently as she could. "What's wrong?"

"I died here," said Mary. She raised a shaking, semi-transparent hand and pointed to the crossroads. "I died here, and then I was standing there, and why don't I remember what happened next? It's all a blur. I just know...I just wanted to go home. That was all. I'd do anything if it meant that I got to go home."

"Where, Mary?" Enid kept her voice low and soothing, like she was afraid that Mary might bolt. And she was, in a way. She didn't know much about ghosts--not compared to Alexander, who had at least made a cursory study of the afterlife--but she knew that most of them spent the bulk of their time in someplace where the living simply weren't. It wasn't Heaven or Hell: Purgatory might have been a better name, except that none of the accounts she'd seen had placed any religious labels on the place. It was just where the dead went when they disappeared.

As far as she knew, Mary had never spent any time in that place. She had died, and then immediately gone back to her life, as if being dead had no more importance than being late for homeroom. If Mary got so upset that she lost her grip on the mortal plane, there was no telling how long it would take her to come back. That might be for the best, in some ways, but it would definitely make it harder to find the girl's body.

"Mary?" prompted Fran. "Come on, sugar, we can't go home until we find you, and you know Alice will worry if we're not back by bedtime."

The color and solidity flowed back into Mary's body like wine flowing back into a bottle, filling her up until she looked as ordinary as anyone else. She took a deep, unnecessary breath, pressing the hand that wasn't pointing at the crossroads against her sternum. Then she turned, ever so slightly, until her outstretched hand was pointing at a patch of corn on the other side of the road, not too far from where they were standing.

"There," she whispered. "Please don't make me look. Please, please don't make me look."

Enid and Fran exchanged a glance. Enid patted the bag she was carrying. It contained everything they'd need to clear away the weeds and gather the pieces of what had once been Mary Dunlavy, three years and a lifetime ago.

"It's all right Mary," said Fran. "You just wait here. We'll take care of everything."

Mary, who was fighting to stay solid, didn't say anything. She just nodded.
In the end, it was easy to find her body. They just looked until they found a place where the corn grew too lush and too green, like it was being tended. Then they pulled the stalks away, a fistful at a time, until they found the sadly grinning skull of a girl who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. She was still wearing the decaying shreds of her Buckley High School letter jacket, and in some ways, that was the saddest thing of all. She would never wear anything else. If she had to be buried, she should have been buried proper, in satin, in a churchyard, with her father to lay roses on her grave. Not like this. Never like this.

"It's not fair," murmured Fran.

"It never is," said Enid. "Now help me dig."

It took them less than ten minutes to fully free her skeleton from the ground. They lifted it up and rolled it in the tarp Enid had produced from her bag, tucking the girl in as carefully as if they were putting her to bed for a long winter's nap. Then they carried her across the road to where her ghost was waiting.

Mary looked at the long gray shape of the tarp, and asked, "Is that me?"

"You know, there's men who've spent their whole lives arguing about that question," said Fran. "No, honey. This isn't you. This is just the house you used to live in, and you don't live here anymore. That's all. Now come on; let's go home before Alice starts to worry."

Again, Mary didn't say anything. She just nodded, and followed the two Healy women across the field back toward their house. There would be time, later, to wonder why the crossroads scared and called to her so; to ask herself what she was going to do, now that her father was gone and she had no one left to haunt. Three years dead, and she was finally about to get on with her life. There would be time for a lot of things. Mary was only just coming to understand, dimly, how much time she had.

But all those things were for later. For now, it was just the three of them, Fran and Enid serving as pallbearers in a funeral that had been put on hold for a long time, but not forever, and one heartbroken, orphaned ghost girl, following them toward the distant lights of home.