

GRAMMA'S CORPSE

Pa looked mighty angry as he walked into Jamie's room, holding her report card. She'd been dreading this moment ever since she flunked two spelling tests in a row. He'd grounded her for three weeks the last time report cards went out, and on that one her lowest grade had been a C.

"Do you mind explaining this to me?" he asked, waving the paper at her.

Jamie lowered her eyes. "I did my best, Pa."

"Is that what you think? You think that getting a C in math and a D in spelling is doing your best?"

"I got two A's."

"You got an A in PE. That don't count. I'm proud of you for getting an A in science, but that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about these C's and D's."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry ain't gonna cut it."

"I'll try harder next time!"

"You just said you did your best. So you were lying. You didn't study hard enough and you were lazy. Ain't that right?"

Jamie slowly nodded her head. "Yes, Pa."

"Lazy kids need to be punished. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, Pa."

"Grounding you obviously don't work. Neither does taking away your allowance. I guess the only punishment that'll teach you a good enough lesson is if you sleep with Gramma's corpse tonight."

"Pa, no!"

"Your ma and I discussed it already. You need to start taking your schoolwork more seriously. So tonight you're going to bed early, and Gramma's dead body is going to be there right next to you."

“That’s not fair!”

“Don’t you try to tell me what’s fair and what ain’t. You’re lucky it’s only for one night. Do you want the same treatment we gave your brother?”

“No, sir.” Matt had slept with Gramma’s corpse for three nights after he got into a fight at school. One night for fighting, one night for disobeying the teacher when she told them to stop, and one night for losing.

“Good. You ain’t watching no TV tonight. You sit here and you do your homework. If you finish it, do it again. We’ll bring Gramma in at eight-thirty, so you’d better be ready.”

Pa was always punctual, and it was exactly eight-thirty when he came back into her room, holding Gramma underneath the shoulders while Ma held her feet. Gramma was still wearing the red dress with white dots that she’d wore to her funeral, and her head lolled forward so that Jamie could only see her stringy gray hair.

“Pull down the covers,” Pa told her. “Help us tuck Gramma in.”

The awful smell was already filling her room. Pa had pumped something into Gramma’s body “to keep the rotting down,” but it made Jamie’s nose burn, and Gramma’s arms and legs looked a lot worse than they had when she died six weeks ago.

“Please, Pa, don’t put her in my bed! I promise I’ll get better grades next time! I’ll study all night! I won’t watch TV for the whole rest of the school year! Please!”

“Don’t make me get out the belt, Jamie.”

“I’ll take the belt! You can belt me all you want! I’ll go fetch it for you! That’s a good punishment, right?”

“Dammit, I said to pull down the covers! Your Gramma’s body ain’t getting any lighter!”

Jamie wanted to cry, but that would make Pa even madder. Instead, she walked over to her bed and pulled down her pretty pink blankets with the horses on them. She’d never be able to sleep under them again.

“The sheets too!” said Pa.

Jamie pulled down the sheets. Ma and Pa gently lay Gramma’s thin body down on the bed on her back, right in the

middle. Pa moved Jamie’s pillow to the center and rested Gramma’s head on it. Her wrinkled, yellow face was pinched up in a scowl. (Jamie figured that *she’d* scowl, too, if her mouth was sewn shut.) Her eyes were closed.

“Go brush your teeth and get in your pajamas,” said Ma, smiling kindly. “Wear the blue lacy ones that Gramma bought you for your birthday. She’ll like that.”

Pa gave Ma a dirty look. “Now, don’t go acting like she’s alive. This is a dead body that ain’t got no preference on the pajamas. We’ve talked about this.”

“I know, I know...”

Jamie got the blue pajamas out of her dresser drawer and went into the bathroom. She brushed her teeth for as long as she could, until Pa yelled at her to hurry up. Then she changed into her pajamas and slowly returned to her room.

Gramma was still scowling.

“Can’t you move her over just a little?” Jamie asked.

Pa shook his head. “You two are sleeping *close*. That’s the only way you’ll learn your lesson. Now get in bed.”

Jamie climbed into her small bed. The only way she could avoid touching Gramma was to have half of her body dangling off the side.

“Stop playing around!” said Pa. “You snuggle up tight to Gramma’s corpse.”

“I can’t!”

“The hell you can’t! Snuggle!”

“*Please*, Pa!”

“I’m gonna count to ten, and I’m gonna skip the first five. If you aren’t all the way in bed you’ll be sleeping with Gramma for the rest of the week!”

“Harold!” said Ma, shocked.

“I mean it! I won’t tolerate no disrespect in my house! Six...seven...”

Jamie quickly scooted against Gramma’s cold body. The smell made her want to throw up and she slapped her hand over her own nose and mouth.

“That’s more like it. Now we’ll be checking on you, and I expect to see both of you in that bed when we do. You lie there

real still, and you think about what you've done, and you go to sleep. Understand?"

"Yes, Pa."

Ma pulled the covers up over both Jamie and Gramma. "Good night, sweetheart. We'll see you in the morning."

"Can I sleep with the light on?"

Pa shook his head. "No, but we'll leave the door cracked open so you get light from the hallway."

"Okay."

Ma and Pa both gave her a kiss on the forehead, and then they left the room. Pa closed the door almost all of the way, letting a single strip of light in across the bed, illuminating Gramma's wrists.

The smell was absolutely horrible. Jamie knew that she'd never get it out of her skin.

Gramma's flesh was chilly and moist. It was cold and wet down in the basement where Pa kept her, so that wasn't surprising. Jamie wondered how long it would take the dead body to at least warm up to room temperature.

She closed her eyes. If she could just fall asleep quickly, it would all be over, except for nightmares. She lay there, trying only to breathe through her mouth, and willed herself to fall asleep.

It wasn't working.

She'd never fall asleep next to a dead body. Even if Gramma smelled like candy and was warm like an electric blanket, she'd never be able to do it.

To be honest, Gramma had been scary before she died. She was always looking at invisible things and licking her lips. She also muttered under her breath, weird words that Jamie couldn't understand. Though she knew that it was bad, really bad, she was actually kind of relieved when Pa told her that God had taken Gramma away.

But just her soul. Not her body.

"No mother of mine is gonna be buried six feet under the dirt," Pa had said. "They did it to Grampa, but they aren't doing it to Gramma! They aren't gonna burn her up, either, and that's a promise!"

Ma and Pa had argued about it, but Pa told her that this was just the way things were going to be. He was going to respect her body until there was no body left to respect. He liked to fix up animals that he'd shot or caught in traps, even though some of them fell apart sometimes, and he'd been really proud when he showed Ma, Jamie, and Matt what he'd done with Gramma.

Most of the time they kept her in the basement. Sometimes they brought her upstairs to sit on the couch when the family watched TV. They never sat her down at the dinner table, though, because Pa said it was unhygienic.

Jamie squeezed her eyes shut as tightly as she could. She squeezed them shut until her eyelids ached, while she begged her mind to let her fall asleep.

Was somebody breathing?

She held her own breath and listened carefully.

She couldn't hear anything except the soft sounds of the TV from downstairs. She opened her eyes and stared at Gramma, watching carefully for a rise and fall of her chest in the shadows, but she wasn't moving.

Of course she wasn't. She was dead.

Gramma's corpse was still cold, and it was also kind of sticky. Jamie would've given almost anything just to be able to scoot away from her, but she had no doubt that Pa would make good on his threat to check on her, and there was no way she could handle sleeping with the body another night.

She lay there, staring at the ceiling. She tried to imagine horses galloping across the ceiling, splashing through a river, carrying her away from her bedroom into a beautiful meadow.

She thought she heard breathing again.

Jamie stared at Gramma, silently praying: *Don't open your eyes. Don't open your eyes. Please don't open your eyes.*

Gramma did not open her eyes. She didn't move at all.

Jamie wanted to cry, but she refused to. No matter what, she wasn't going to cry, and not just because it would make Pa angry. She was going to be brave. Gramma was dead. She couldn't hurt her, not even a little bit. This was *her* room, and *her* bed, and she wasn't going to let a dead old lady scare her anymore.

It was like the creepy doll Ma had got her last Christmas. At