**BEAUTY IS IN THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDER**

The winding road was like driving through a twisting green tunnel. The evergreens and maple tree limbs almost met each other in the center of the highway, interlocking their branches as if trying to silently kiss each other.

“*Just like my life*,” Megan muttered. “*Two different species falling in love with no answer to their silent* *pleas*.”

She had not planned this trip into the wilderness. A bitter argument with her boyfriend, Rob, followed by a monumental falling-out with her girlfriend, Alicia, had thrown her normally sanguine life into sudden turmoil.

Megan loved Rob, but she also loved Alicia. Her mind told her one thing and her emotions told her another. She didn’t thing she was gay, but Alicia’s physical taunting turned her deepest thoughts into an erotic mix of need and arousal. Bob’s kindness and brazen masculinity offered her another variation of uncontrollable emotions.

She was off to see Grandma Anna; or Granda, as she was affectionately called, lived on a small farm nestled deep in the forested hills of Virginia, not a long drive but well away from the voracious madness of the Arlington area.

Her thoughts were on the bitter words she and Alicia had exchanged as she turned off onto a rural country road covered with white gravel. The road was narrow and overgrown, and there was barely enough room for her small car. She knew her chances of meeting another vehicle on this stretch of road were slim, so she pushed down on the accelerator, anxious to reach the peace and tranquility of Granda’s farm.

Granda was standing on the front steps of her small ranch house as she pulled up and parked in the circular gravel driveway. Megan turned off the ignition and opened her door. Her senses were immediately assaulted by a plethora of powerful odors, from heavy evergreen, to gentle lilac; from rich wood decay to musky ragweed.

Granda had not changed, she never changed. She was still the quintessential portrait of the perfect grandmother; short, rotund, a large bun of gray hair on her back neck, rosy cheeks, a white apron with flowers embroidered on it and Santa Clause like glasses on her little button nose.

Megan enjoyed visiting Granda, although her visits were rare and seemed to be stretching further and further apart. She was the one person who never questioned Megan on her choices in life, never scolded her for her failures, never tried to dig into her life in any way. Granda simply accepted her for who she was, a granddaughter she loved and pampered as often as she could.

The remainder of that day Megan absorbed the peace and tranquility which abounded in and around Granda’s home, along with the wonderful scent of ginger and cinnamon, the sound of chattering squirrels, and the steady buzz of honeybees. Despite the tumultuous thoughts running back and forth in her head, she enjoyed a deep and peaceful sleep and awoke to the awesome scent of biscuits and gravy and strawberry jam.

Following a hearty breakfast; which she seldom had time for in her busy workaholic schedule, Megan decided to take a stroll among the whispering trees and along the narrow stream that wound back into the hills behind Granda’s home. This was a rocky waterway she had often explored as a young girl, although she was never permitted to wander too far.

After several hours of steady meandering, Megan finally glanced at her watch. She had been so absorbed by the peace and quiet of her surroundings she did not realize the lengthy distance she had covered. She started to turn around and go back but something in the distance caught her eye. It appeared to be the sun reflecting off a sparkling object.

Megan shortly found herself surrounded by flowers in a beautiful little glade nestled against a clear shallow pond. Water slowly trickled over and down a ledge of large brown rocks, creating a spectacular miniature waterfall. The place was unbelievably beautiful and pristine.

She slowly absorbed the abundant beauty until her eyes fell on the glinting object that had initially drawn her to this peaceful meadow. It appeared to be an old fruit jar filled with water and hanging from the trees on a string. There was something in the jar but it was too high for her to determine what it was. The jars were spaced about twenty feet apart and followed a narrow rocky trail up the far side of the glade.

Megan followed the jars and soon spotted a small house nestled against the brown rocks of an overhanging cliff. The house was small and reminded her of a Hobbit home, similar to the ones in the movie, *Lord of the Rings*. She could see a small figure sitting in a rocking chair on a tiny deck. As she drew closer to the house, she recognized the face and physical build of a very old lady under a billowing bonnet. The woman was mending a piece of clothing as she steadily rocked back and forth. Although the shadows around the house were deep, the woman wore a pair of large sunglasses.

“*Morning*,” Megan stated, walking up to within ten feet of the woman.

“*Tiz afternoon*,” the woman replied with a smile. The smile was so broad that her little round face was creased into a thousand small wrinkles.

“*Don’t mean to trespass*,” Megan said, “*but I was following the stream and didn’t know that anyone lived this far back*.”

*“Welcome child. I’m an old blind lady who seldom gets visitors, so you’re a sight for sore eyes. Sore eyes, get it?”* The old woman broke into a sharp cackle at her silly attempt at humor.

Megan didn’t think the joke was that funny but she grinned to appease the old woman. *“What’s with the Mason jars full of water?”* she asked, *“and the Christmas lights? You have electricity all the way out here?”*

“No electricity, no plumbing, no gas. The jars are filled with water and hung to keep the flies and mosquitoes away. The insects see themselves reflected in the water and it scares them off. The Christmas lights reflect the sun and it’s pretty to see.”

*“It’s absolutely beautiful around here,”* Megan replied, wondering just how a blind person could see sun light reflected from anything. The old woman was obviously not what she appeared to be, or she was a few bricks shy of a full load.

*“Beauty, they say, is in the eyes of the beholder,”* the old woman said in a profound voice.

One of the jars suddenly fell. The heavy grass and thick flowers cushioned it, preventing it from breaking*. “I’ll get it,”* Megan stated, quickly rushing over to the spot. She bent over and grasped the heavy jar full of water. As she held it up, she could see what it contained.

Megan let out a terrifying scream - and fainted.

Rob pulled his SUV up behind Megan’s car and slowly got out. He scanned the woods and driveway and finally settled on a plump figure standing on the porch of a small house. It was mid-morning. After a sleepless night he awoke with one thought on his mind, to find Megan and beg her to marry him

“*Morning,”* he addressed the woman on the porch. *“Hope you’re Megan’s grandmother, otherwise I’m trespassing on private property.”*

*“You must be Rob,”* the woman replied. *“Call me Granda, Megan does. Join me for some tea or coffee?”*

“*So, is Megan around?”* Rob asked, slowly sipping a mug of hot coffee. He was suddenly aware of the curious look on the woman’s face. *“I’m here for one reason only. I want to ask Megan to marry me.”*

Granda smiled and patted his hand. *I figured that,”* she stated. *I’m worried about Megan. She left early yesterday for a stroll along the creek. When she didn’t return last night I didn’t know what to do. I’m too old and can’t walk very far and my neighbor who takes me to the store twice a month won’t be here for three more days. I would appreciate it if you would head up stream and look for her. She may have fell and is injured and can’t walk back.”*

Rob was out the door almost before Granda finished talking. She slowly walked to the porch and pointed in the direction of the small creek that meandered behind her house. *“Follow the creek; she used to play along it when she was a little girl.”*

Rob headed into the thick underbrush. Despite the urgency he felt, he couldn’t help but notice the beauty and serenity of his surroundings. Several hours of fast-paced walking soon brought him to the gorgeous little meadow with the clear pond and quaint waterfall. He noticed the trail and the jars and holiday lights spaced along it.

As he rounded a bend in the trail, he nearly bumped into the smiling figure of an old woman holding a bouquet of bright flowers she must have recently picked. *“Excuse me,”* Rob blurted, wiping sweat from his forehead. *“I’m looking for a young girl who may have strolled in this direction.”*

“*No one has been here in many years young man,”* the old woman replied. “And besides, a blind person couldn’t see them anyway.” She slowly removed her sunglasses to expose two empty sockets where her eyes once resided.

“*Sorry mam,”* Rob returned. *“If you hear her, please tell her I’m looking for her. I’m going to follow another trail back to her grandmother’s house just in case she went home that way.”*

A few yards down the trail he ran into Alicia, who had arrived shortly after he left to search for Megan. Alicia gave him a nasty but inquisitive look.

*“No, I haven’t found her,”* Rob angrily stated. *“I’m heading back to her Grandma’s, and search in a different direction.”* He left without waiting for her reply.

Suddenly, Megan was awake. Something was very different. She slowly glanced around. To her right she spotted a Mason jar. The liquid was so clear, she could see a pair of eyes in it; brown eyes, with a hint of gold flecks around the pupil and, they were moving. Quickly looking left, she spotted another jar with pleading blue eyes. Looking down she spotted the old woman beneath her. She was staring up at Megan, however, she was no longer old and wrinkled, she was an incredibly beautiful young girl.

*“As I told you, Megan, beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. You are now beholding me as I want to look. I see myself through your eyes and through all the other eyes around me. Am I not beautiful? Not old, not wrinkled, but vivacious and in the prime of life.”*

Now, fully aware of what the old woman had done to her, Megan screamed! *“What did you do with my body you old hag? I want it back.”*

*“Only I can hear your thoughts,”* she replied. *“No! You cannot have your body back. I can see only so long as I have other eyes to see. The vision only lasts for twenty feet, so I have to have a new pair of eyes as I move along. I’m almost down to the beautiful meadow where I sold my soul. Just one more pair of eyes and I will have enough eyes to see that wonderful meadow.”*

Megan watched as Rob approached and talked with the woman. She wanted to scream and yell for help, but she knew he could not hear the voice she did not have. She watched him leave with anguish on his face. Shortly thereafter, she saw Alicia walking slowly up the trail.

The old; now beautiful, young woman looked up at her with a beaming smile spread across her face.

*Well Well. Looks like my lucky day!”*

**WORD COUNT – 1992**