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Aunt Gertrude

It was a north wind that blew Aunt Gertrude into town. At least that was how it seemed, for on the night she arrived at Liz's house, there was blue lightning in the sky and the wind howled fiercely against the shutters. And when Liz opened the front door, there stood her Aunt Gertrude, wearing a long purple coat and a green hat with flowers on it.

Aunt Gertrude's shimmering skirt grazed the floor as she floated through the front door. The silver bracelets on her wrists tinkled as she reached out to hug Liz, and then Charlie. Her laugh came in waves, musical and beautiful, and the smell of lavender filled the air. Liz breathed in and smiled. She never knew quite what to expect when her Aunt came to visit. It always seemed a surprise was around the corner.

"My goodness," Aunt Gertrude plopped her large bag on the floor and stood back to look at them. "I think you kids have each grown about a foot since I saw you last!" She laughed and pointed to her bag. "I brought you something special. Just let me get settled in and you can open your gifts."

Mom hugged Aunt Gertrude tightly, and Dad showed her to the guest room. Charlie tagged along, with his dog Bo right beside him panting and clicking his claws on the wood floor.

Liz stood watching her family, and for just a moment she had an impulse to call out – "Stop! Wait!" She couldn't explain it but she felt they were all walking towards something - that if they didn't stop right then, her life would never be the same. Liz shook her head, trying to get rid of the feeling. Her feet found their way down the hallway, where Charlie stood like a sentinel beside the closed door to the guest room. Liz could hear her mother and father talking quietly in the kitchen. The sound of beautiful singing floated from behind the closed door and then, suddenly, it opened.

Aunt Gertrude winked and said, "Your mother says you must wait for your presents until after dinner." She raised her eyebrows as if to say "You know how your mother is."

Aunt Gertrude swirled out of the room and down the hallway. But after only a few steps, she turned back abruptly. "Oh, and children, I unpacked some of my things. Including some special books. Whatever you do," her face grew more serious than Liz had ever seen her before,

“don’t touch any of the books on the bookshelf.” And she leaned down, her eyes wide and repeated, “Whatever you do.” She nodded firmly and walked away down the hall. When Liz turned back around, Charlie was already through the door, with Bo panting at his heels.

The plain room seemed transformed. Aunt Gertrude’s things were placed all around. A green scarf covered the lamp, making the light dim and muted. A shiny purple silk lay over the bedspread and shimmered in the light. The room smelled of lavender and musk. Liz was certain she could hear somewhere a dim tinkling just like Aunt Gertrude’s bracelets. As Liz glanced around the room she smiled. She felt she could stay there forever. But when her gaze fell on the bookshelf, she drew in her breath.

On the shelf was a set of books, each a different color. The first book in the set was a deep purple, with silver script along the spine. Liz moved closer to examine the writing, but she did not recognize the letters. They seemed to be all spirals and curls. Charlie pushed his glasses back on his nose and stared at the writing on the purple book.

“What does it say?” he looked up at Liz, his head cocked to the side. Liz smiled. She hadn’t heard that from her little brother in a long time. He was five, and only in kindergarten, but he could read better than most kids twice his age. He always had his nose in a book. But sometimes he got frustrated trying to pronounce a long word. He could read them easily, but sometimes his mouth just couldn’t keep up with his brain.

Liz put a hand on his shoulder and gazed at the purple book. It wasn’t written in English, of that she was sure. “I don’t know,” she replied, shaking her head.

As she stared, the writing seemed to move. She knew it was impossible. It must have just been the dim light playing tricks on her. She felt a little dizzy, and she heard a soft humming in her head that made her sleepy. Charlie reached out his hand, and before Liz could stop him, he had pulled the purple book from the shelf and opened the cover. Liz’s head spun, and she felt as if she might fall over. She closed her eyes for only a second. When she opened them, Charlie was gone. Liz watched the book - still in midair, where Charlie had been holding it - fall slowly to the floor. Bo barked, his tail pointing up in surprise.

“Charlie!” Liz called, panic rising in her chest. Without a thought, she reached for the purple book. As she picked it up, she heard her mother just outside the room.

“Liz?” her Mom called. But the word seemed to freeze in midair. Liz felt the room swirl around her, felt her stomach dip and swoosh as if she were falling down a long slide. The room melted away and Liz found herself in darkness.