



*“My girl, my girl don't lie to me
Tell me where did you sleep last night?
In the pines, in the pines
Where the sun don't ever shine
I would shiver the whole night through...”*

FLOWER GIRL

by

Debbie Kuhn

“That god-awful stench is the first thing you’ll notice – right before you see her,” Lila said, shuddering.

Eli Rosenberg crossed his legs and stared at the plantation house secretary. In all his sixty-three years, he’d never laid eyes on a ghost, never heard anything go bump in the night, and he never expected to either. But he didn’t want to offend the pretty, young blonde.

“Well, don’t worry, if I smell something evil, I won’t wait around to see what’s coming. I’ll run like the devil himself is after me.”

“That won’t do you any good. Everybody who’s seen the flower girl has ended up having an accident or a streak of bad luck. The last gardener that worked here was nearly killed in a car wreck the next morning. And me? I fell down the grand staircase afterwards and broke my arm. The only reason I’m still here is because I’m a single mother with no degree.”

Eli raised a bushy eyebrow. “So, you’re saying I’d be better off finding a summer

job elsewhere?”

Lila leaned forward over her cluttered desk.

“That’s up to you,” she said. “I just felt it was my Christian duty to let you know *why* we have such a high employee turnover.”

Eli had to admit the plantation looked haunted. Even though the new owners had restored the white-columned antebellum mansion to its original splendor, the surrounding atmosphere felt heavy with tragic secrets just waiting to be discovered. This gloominess was due in part to the ancient live oaks that stood sentinel nearby, draped in Spanish moss, forever casting their eerie shadows over the house and grounds.

“Have you seen the little flower girl yet?” Eli asked.

His teenage assistant was helping him trim the hedges on the south side of Bainbridge Hall, and Eli was really just trying to make conversation.

Tracy shook his curly red head. “I haven’t worked here long, but I think the story is true. Happened a long time ago, but most people around here know all about the Melissa Tolliver murder. They found her body over in the pine grove by the lake.” He finished off his bottle of spring water with one sloppy gulp. “Anyway, Lila and the others, they ain’t a bunch of crackpots. If they say the place is haunted, I’d believe it.”

Overactive imaginations can lead to mass hallucinations Eli thought. Aloud he said,

“Guess you’re right. At least it makes this job a little more interesting, eh?”

“You don’t believe in her, do you?”

Eli removed his silver-rimmed glasses and wiped the sweat off his craggy face. He was an upstate New Yorker, originally, and these humid South Carolina summers never failed to kick his Yankee butt.

“Even if I saw her, son, I’d still have a hard time believing.”

Tracy grinned. “From what I hear, she can be pretty dang convincing.”

Four days later, on his way into work, Eli stopped at a toy store right outside Charleston to buy his granddaughter a birthday present. His late wife, Annabelle, had been an unrepentant shopaholic. She'd had a knack for choosing the perfect gift, no matter what the occasion.

And that was only one of the thousand and one reasons he missed her so much.

Eli wandered aimlessly around the deserted superstore, overwhelmed by the sheer number of toys, games and gadgets on display. They were piled waist-high in colorful rubber bins, and stacked on shelves that rose all the way up to the fifteen-foot ceiling. He finally picked out a doll that seemed to do everything a real baby could do: eat, pee, cry, kick, wave its arms. While he was there, he couldn't resist getting his grandson a battery-operated locomotive that whistled and blew smoke out of its short, black stack.

Eli came thundering up the plantation's long driveway in his pickup about five minutes after nine. Not bad, considering the traffic he'd had to fight. Nobody could accuse him of driving like an old geezer.

With the sun already scorching the top of his bare head, he headed over to the green and white outbuildings that were lined up at a good distance behind the Hall. Fridays were for mowing, an all day project that had to be completed before the weekend.

Outdoor weddings were popular in June.

Right before Eli reached the shed that housed the Bush Hog mowers, the doors flew open and Tracy came barreling towards him. The kid's green eyes were bulged out like a toad's.

"I just seen her! She's behind the shed!"

"Whoa, settle down." Eli grabbed the boy's skinny shoulders and forced him to stand still.

"I thought there was a dead cat in there. Then I felt something staring at me, and it was *her*. She was watching me through the cracks in the back wall."

"Stay here. I'll go check it out."

"No! It's too late for me, but you're still safe. You haven't seen her."

Eli chuckled. "Take it easy, son. Nothing bad is going to happen to either one of us."

Tracy crossed himself feverishly, making Eli chuckle even harder. The kid was probably a Baptist.

He approached the shed and immediately caught a whiff of something foul. It smelled like a dead animal that had been baking under a hot sun for a couple of days.

On the left side of the outbuilding, in the tall grass, Eli spotted a trail of dried, pink flowers.

He followed them around to the back of the shed and stopped short. A little blond-haired girl in a blue chiffon dress stood with her back to him, holding a white straw basket. She dropped a handful of dead, crumbly rose petals on the ground and began to sing.

“Dum dum da dum, dum dum da dum.”

Eli smiled.

She had to belong to the tour group up at the mansion. They must’ve thought it would be mighty funny to scare off the help. The grownups were probably out there snickering behind the oak trees with their expensive, complicated camcorders. He wondered where they’d gotten the dead cat.

“Okay, sweetheart. The game’s up.”

The little girl just stood there, giggling.

He took a step in her direction, and she looked back over her shoulder at him with sunken, shriveled eyes.

Eli’s jaw dropped, and he let it hang there, convinced his frantic heart would soon jump out of his mouth. Her face – what was left of it – was too horrible to comprehend. Greenish-black flesh hung off the skull in oozing, maggoty strips.

The putrid scent of decay washed over him, and he gagged.

The flower girl smiled ghoulishly. She didn’t have any lips, just a row of perfect white baby teeth.

“Eli! You all right?”

Melissa Tolliver’s ghost turned and skipped away from him, disappearing around the corner of the shed.

Eli hadn’t realized a person could taste fear. His had a cold, metallic flavor.

He swallowed the lump in his throat and chased after her, rounding the corner and colliding hard with Tracy.

“What happened? Did you see her?” The teenager was so pale, the spray of freckles across his nose looked like an outbreak of measles.

“Did *you* see her, just now?” Eli adjusted his glasses.

“No, and I hope to God I never do again.”

At noon, Eli carried his boxed lunch over to the south terrace and joined Lila at one of the wrought-iron tables. He didn't have much of an appetite.

"I think you were lucky." Lila stirred sweetener into a tall glass of iced tea. "She wasn't singing songs and throwing flowers when I ran into her – she was floating down the upstairs hall with a belt wrapped around her neck." She paused briefly. "The poor thing was strangled."

Eli reluctantly took a bite out of his tuna fish sandwich.

"What happened to the killer?" he mumbled.

"It was a teenager named Danny Brisco. He hanged himself in his jail cell the night before the sentencing."

Eli couldn't help but wonder if the guy had had some otherworldly "help."

It was funny. A few hours ago, his skeptical brain wouldn't have been capable of producing such a thought. Seeing was believing – whether he liked it or not.

He took a swig from his lukewarm can of Coke, just as the quiet afternoon was shattered by a woman's scream. The sound had come from inside the mansion.

He and Lila exchanged a knowing look before rushing the French doors.

All the commotion was at the front of the Hall, where Tracy lay unconscious on the floor, just inside the foyer. The kid's red, splotchy face was swelled so badly that his eyes were almost invisible.

Violet – a heavyset black woman who worked as a tour guide – was kneeling beside the boy with her crimson hoop skirts spread across him. Her tear-streaked face wore a helpless expression.

"He got stung by a bee! He can't breathe!"

"Has anybody called 911?" Lila asked, her voice calm.

"Kathleen's in the office, calling them right now." Violet shook her head slowly. "But I don't think this poor child's going to make it."

Eli dragged himself out of bed on Saturday and hopped in the shower. His granddaughter's birthday party was later that morning, and he hadn't even wrapped her gift yet.

It was a hell of a bad time for a celebration anyway: Tracy was gone. Help had arrived too late to save him.

As soon as the ambulance had pulled away with the body, Violet had quit her job and fled. She hadn't even bothered to change out of her costume.

After the tour guide's stormy defection, a tearful Lila had looked over at Eli and said, "I'm surprised you aren't in the next county by now."

He had shrugged. "This could just be a terrible coincidence. If not, it won't do me any good to run, remember?"

But you can bet I'll be looking over my shoulder for the rest of my golden years.

Eli cautiously stepped out of the shower and dried off. It took him less than five minutes to get dressed and more than thirty to wrap his grandbaby's present. He'd done a piss-poor job, but at least all the doll parts were covered. The heavy locomotive would have to wait.

Eli's tiny apartment in the Historic District of Charleston was three blocks away from Greg and Cheryl's brick townhouse. His daughter had offered to pick him up, but he couldn't see the point in either of them driving.

The heat wave they'd been having had subsided. The walk would do him good – not that there was anything wrong with the old ticker.

Eli ambled up Columbus Street towards the ocean. The sidewalks were teeming with tourists and street entertainers. Traffic was zooming by, providing a slight breeze. In the air, exhaust fumes mixed with the scent of deep-fried seafood.

The aroma actually made his mouth water – he hadn't made time for breakfast.

Eli neared Hanover Street, where the townhouse stood on the corner. The grandkids, Austin and Amber, would be jumping up and down on the second floor balcony, trying to catch a glimpse of his tall, thin figure.

He was less than half a block away from the intersection at Columbus and Hanover when he came across a section of sidewalk that had one of those wide metal trapdoors stretched across it. He had never trusted those things to hold up his weight. Under the circumstances, he certainly wasn't going to trust one now.

The other side of the walkway was blocked by a herd of noisy teenagers waiting at a bus stop. They stood around gabbing on miniscule cell phones and sipping Starbucks coffee.

Instead of plowing his way through the indifferent crowd, Eli decided to walk around a parked SUV. The vehicle in question was vibrating to the sound of a raunchy rap tune – motivating him to get by it in a hurry.

He stepped past the SUV onto the street.

“OLD MAN, LOOK OUT!”

He glanced to his left. A boy on a ten-speed was hurtling towards him.

THUNK!

Eli fell back against the SUV as Amber’s foil-wrapped doll became a missile. He watched it land in the middle of the street.

The boy on the bicycle sped on without looking back.

Eli figured the doll was living on borrowed time. He could empathize, but what was he going to do about it? Traffic was still whizzing by.

He watched a Buick swerve to avoid the shiny, odd-shaped package.

Across the street, a middle-aged homeless man appeared to be assessing the situation. He made eye contact with Eli and lifted his shoulders, giving him a palms-up gesture.

But a few seconds later, a smile spread across the man’s bearded face. He looked over at Eli and pointed up the street.

A horse-drawn carriage had just turned onto Columbus and was making its way towards them, slowing the eastbound traffic to a crawl.

It was worth a try. The Miraculous Maddie Doll was still in one piece.

Eli waited until the carriage was about three car-lengths away and then darted out into the street, snatching up the present. Just as he turned to sprint back, he heard an engine revving.

He looked over and saw a red Corvette passing the carriage, charging at him like an angry bull. The driver laid on his horn.

Eli jumped forward, his right foot landing in a small pothole. A sharp pain shot through his ankle and he went sprawling. The doll skidded across the pavement towards the carriage as the Corvette roared past.

The startled horse kicked the present back out into the street.

Eli retrieved his glasses and found himself nose to nose with the smelly old nag. The lady driver had stopped the carriage.

He turned his head in time to see a dune buggy's low-slung fender clip the doll, sending it flying in the opposite direction.

The homeless man saw it coming and zeroed in on it like a running back intercepting a pass. He sprang into the air and caught the ripped package neatly under his arm.

Eli grinned in relief.

The man promptly lifted the doll over his head and did a victory dance up and down the sidewalk.

Eli went back to work a week later. Everyone was surprised to see him.

They thought he'd gotten off pretty light with just a sprained ankle and a smattering of bruises. Even "Maddie's" injuries were repairable.

Eli wasn't about to give up his job so easily. (Being a Wal-Mart greeter wasn't for him.) He needed the money to supplement his teacher's retirement, but that wasn't the only reason he hadn't quit. His stubbornness had asserted itself: He wasn't going to let a little girl's ghost get the better of him. If Lila could stick it out, so could he.

Besides, maybe the specter was finished with him. Perhaps she only appeared to people once, which would mean he was immune to any more bad luck.

This theory eased his fears over the next two weeks.

On the last Saturday in June – a brutally hot morning – Eli drove into work to perform a few last-minute chores that needed to be done before the outdoor wedding ceremonies could begin that day. He still didn't have a new assistant, hence the overtime.

His first task was wheeling a cartload of fresh flowers out to the gazebo by the lake. They'd probably be wilted by noon, but that wasn't his problem. He placed some of the potted petunias by the steps of the gazebo and arranged the rest along the low walls. Then he fetched a broom off the wooden cart and began sweeping the painted floor.

Even in the shade, beads of sweat formed on his brow and dripped into his eyes. The back of his work shirt was soon soaked.

Eli pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at his face and neck, thinking that a frosty glass of lemonade would hit the spot. He was about to stuff the handkerchief back in his pocket when he felt a little tug on his shirttail.

“Mister, do you like my new dress?” The vengeful ghost had a small, sweet voice.

God Almighty.

If the wind had been blowing in the other direction, he would have smelled her first. Eli let go of the broom and turned around.

He knew better than to run. Maybe he should talk to it. Maybe that would make it happy and it would go away.

Eli blocked out the flower girl’s hideous face and focused on her powder-blue outfit instead. It was trimmed with embroidered white daisies, and had a wide silk sash. She was wearing frilly socks and white patent shoes. Her long, blond hair was tied back with blue and white ribbons.

Just don’t look at the face.

Eli cleared his throat. “My now, aren’t you a pretty little thing.” His voice sounded strange to his own ears.

The flower girl giggled.

Eli kept staring at her shoes. The straps were decorated with heart-shaped cutouts. His granddaughter had a pair of shoes like that. Amber was five years old now.

“Can you help me find the lost puppy?” Melissa Tolliver asked, swinging her basket high and low. “He’s in the woods over there.” She pointed across the small lake to a grove of pine trees swaying in the breeze. “If I find him, I get to keep him.”

Eli felt a lump form in his throat. *So that’s how the son of a bitch lured her away.*

“The puppy isn’t in the woods anymore, sweetheart. He’s gone home. Maybe you should go home, too.”

“It’s a long way off,” she said, sighing. “Mommy and Daddy went home and left me here. Why did they do that, mister? Was I bad?”

Eli’s gaze moved up to the flower girl’s face. It looked almost normal.

“No, I don’t think you were bad. You just got lost, like the puppy, that’s all. I’m sure your parents miss you very much.”

A feeling of profound sadness swept over Eli. He thought about his grandbabies. What if something this horrific ever happened to one of them? The world was full of monsters just like Brisco.

How could a person even go on after their child was murdered this way – forever imagining the fear and pain they'd suffered before the end? How did the Tollivers do it? Did they both go mad?

Eli could barely see for the tears. He took off his glasses and sank to the floor of the gazebo.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered. “So sorry this happened to you.”

“Shhh!” The flower girl danced up and down the steps in front of him. “Don’t be sad. It’s okay now. See?”

She appeared by his left shoulder and sprinkled him with handfuls of soft, pink rose petals. Eli had never smelled anything sweeter.

The flower girl’s face was beautiful now. She smiled at him, showing off a set of perfectly matched dimples. Her blue eyes were large and round and innocent.

“I’ve got to go now, mister. Bye!”

She hopped down the steps and ran across the emerald lawn, pausing at the edge of the lake. She seemed to be waiting for something to happen.

Eli wiped his eyes and put his glasses back on. The flower girl was glowing.

He stood and looked in the direction of her gaze. A brilliant ball of white light appeared on the other side of the lake. It floated quickly across the shimmering water towards the little girl, who waved at it happily.

The sparkling orb expanded and surrounded her, somehow becoming even brighter.

Eli heard what sounded like a whole playground filled with children: peals of laughter and excited little voices.

He descended the gazebo steps and walked out into the yard.

The light vanished, taking the flower girl home.

THE END