

# The Last Garden in Time's Window

## Dean Wesley Smith

*Dean Wesley Smith has sold over twenty novels and around one hundred short stories to various magazines and anthologies. He's been a finalist for the Hugo and Nebula Awards, and has won a World Fantasy Award and a Locus Award. He was the editor and publisher of Pulphouse Publishing, and has just finished editing the Star Trek anthology Strange New Worlds II.*

THE sun beat through the window over the sink, making the small main room of the trailer feel degrees too hot. In my memory, as far back as being a young boy, this trailer always felt hot and stuffy. In the summer, Grandma and Grandpa never opened the doors. In the winter, the gas stove just put out too much heat for the tiny eight-by-twenty trailer.

I turned and blocked the door open, then threaded my way past my grandfather's stuffed armchair to the small kitchen and forced open the window there. A faint summer breeze took some of the heat, but left the smell of my grandparents. The lingering odors of his cigars, her perfume, were embedded in every pore of the space.

It was almost as if they were still there, Grandpa in his chair, Grandma in the small kitchen behind his chair. She always did all the talking when I visited, asking me about work, about which woman I was dating. Except for an occasional grunt or laugh, Grandpa had very seldom made a noise or spoken an entire sentence to me.

I stood near the dark gas heater, trying not to touch anything. I didn't want to accidentally trigger a memory spell. Dirk, my master, had told me a dozen times to be careful, repeating it over and over right up until I got on the plane. He didn't think my magic was ready to be used or controlled without his watchful eye. I was just an apprentice and I should damn well remember that.

I did think about his warning, but now standing in my grandparents' old trailer home that sat tucked back in a shabby trailer park in Boise, Idaho, I was having trouble caring. This was a different world, far more distant than the thousand miles that separated me now from the world where I learned to control my magic with Dirk in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Boise was where I grew up and where I now had to try to understand what happened to my grandparents. Why I had stared at two caskets side by side at the funeral today. Oh, I knew the "how" of their death. The police said the gas stove had finally leaked, filling the trailer and killing them while they slept. A neighbor had noticed the smell and called the fire department.

But I just couldn't bring myself to believe it had really happened. Not after all these years of the two of them living in this trailer. An accident like that wasn't something they would ever allow to happen, no matter how old they got. Or at least that was what I wanted to believe.

After the service at their graves, I had thought about calling Dirk, asking him to come and help me, but I knew what his answer would be. He would smile and shake his head, his perfectly-combed hair not mussing. I could almost hear his voice say the words, *When you are ready, you can find the answer to their deaths. But first you must learn the control and the discipline of your magic.*

More than likely he would have been right. I had learned to trust the guy who looked like a golf pro in his Izod shirts and golf slacks. Dirk seemed to know everything there was to know about magic. He was rumored, among the other apprentices I was on-line with, to be one of the most powerful magicians in the world. Considering there were thousands of full magicians around the world and thousands more apprentices like me, that was saying something.

But sitting in my grandparents' old, tiny trailer, I didn't much care or want to listen. Something had taken the two most important people in my life from me, and I was going to find out what.

I stood, and without touching anything, tried to really look at the trailer around me, to see if anything was missing or out of place. One big armchair that had been my grandfather's sat in the center of the

room, another smaller one on the other side of the gas stove had been Grandma's place. A tiny, blanket-covered couch under the room's one window had always been for guests. I remembered sitting on that couch a thousand times. The space was so small that half the time I had to keep my legs tucked under me to keep from kicking Grandma.

Behind Grandpa's chair was a tiny kitchen, beyond that a bathroom I could barely even turn around in, and then a bedroom taken up completely by a queen-sized bed. A closet with a few drawers was across from the bathroom and what few clothes the two of them had were still hanging there.

I hesitated before pulling the drape aside and going in to the bedroom where they had died. I still didn't understand how they could have lived like this. My single dorm room in college had had more room. Yet they never seemed to be hurting for money, and had no desire, even during the days I had worked for Microsoft and had a ton of money, to take my offer of moving them to a house. Grandma had just smiled every time I had offered, patted me on the hand, and said, "We're fine here, dear. We have more than enough room. Thank you."

So after a few years I had quit offering, then when the magic started to show itself, Dirk appeared at my door in Seattle, took me under his wing, told me that what was happening to me wasn't my imagination, or a deadly disease, and convinced me to move to Scottsdale to train and learn control. He flat-out told me that I had hidden magic talents and Microsoft was no place for me.

So I quit and went with him.

Now, six months later, a day after my thirty-fifth birthday, both my grandparents were found dead on their bed.

I took a deep breath of the stuffy air and carefully pulled aside the curtain that sheltered the small bedroom. Two indents were clear on the bed. One short and not very deep: Grandma. One a little taller and smashed into the mattress: Grandpa.

The police were not talking to me at all. The paper had said they had died of unknown causes which were under investigation. But the trailer had been open for me to come and go as I wanted. And I saw no signs of an investigation, no police tape, nothing. Clearly the police thought they died of some old-age thing and didn't care.

But to me nothing made sense. Granted they were both in their late eighties, but both were healthy and active.

I stared at the two body marks for a moment, then turned back to the front part of the trailer. If I was going to discover what killed them, I would have to start slow and move carefully and remember every ounce of magic training Dirk had given me so far.

I moved so that I stood in the middle of the tiny living room and faced my grandmother's chair. Then spelling the word "d-i-s-c-o-v-e-r," I sat down.

For me, magic always started with a tingling in my fingers that quickly ran up my hands into my head, making me so dizzy that I had to close my eyes. It was what had sent me to the Seattle hospital half a dozen times, and what Dirk said had led him to me. He told me that after a few years of practice, the "ignition effects" as he called the tingling and dizziness, would go away.

I closed my eyes as the tingling raced up my arms and into my head.

Then it was gone, much quicker than normal.

I found myself in a wonderful-smelling kitchen. I knew, intellectually, that I was actually still sitting in Grandma's chair in the trailer, but around me was a massive kitchen that was all white and stainless steel. Someone had been baking and the smell of cherry pie filled the air. Through the kitchen window I could see blue sky and pine trees.

I walked around the room, not touching anything. The place looked familiar. The table and six chairs against one wall covered by a checkered red-and-white tablecloth finally gave me the clue. This was a vastly expanded version of my grandmother's kitchen back in their old home. They had owned the home for forty years before selling it and moving into the small trailer. I could remember, as a kid, sitting at the kitchen table while Grandma baked. Clearly, my magic had brought me back to one of my own

memories. This wasn't going to help me.

I opened my eyes.

As if someone had snapped off a television picture, I was back *in* the trailer.

I stood and moved over to Grandfather's chair. Spelling the words "d-i-s-c-o-v-e-r G-r-a-n-d-f-a-t-h-e-r," I sat. The tingling started, I closed my eyes, and this time found myself outside, in a mountain forest of pine and brush. The air was biting cold and very crisp.

Slowly I looked around, trying to take in every detail. There was nothing to see but pine trees, rocks, and brush. The air felt like morning and the sun was low on the horizon. There was a slight dew on the ground in places.

What looked like a game trail moved off down the slight hill, so I followed, moving easily through the brush and marveling at how real the discover walk felt, right down to the branches scratching my arms. This magic was still so new to me, it often surprised me.

After a hundred paces the trees thinned and I could see a 1950's pickup truck with an old camper on the back. A canvas tent was set up to one side, and three rifles were leaning against the back of the camper. A deer had been skinned and was hanging on a pole between two trees, cooling.

I knew instantly that I was in another of my own memories. The smallest gun leaning against Grandpa's old camper was mine. I got to carry it back the first time my father had let me go hunting with him and my grandparents. The deer hanging was the last one my dad shot before he died that winter in a car accident. I had never gone hunting with my grandparents again, even though they always asked me to go.

I opened my eyes, snapping the vision of that old camp away, replacing it with the hot little trailer. It almost felt good after the cool mountain air in the last memory vision.

I stood and moved outside, trying to get some fresh air. My magic clearly wasn't strong enough to overpower the memories of my own childhood. It was clear I really didn't have any choice. I was going to have to button up the trailer, get back on the plane, and go back to Scottsdale and Dirk and keep learning until I had enough skill to do this right. I had enough money to pay the rent on the space in this crummy little park, so that wasn't a problem.

But leaving was. I needed some closure, and going back wasn't going to give that to me. I needed to know why my grandparents had died. Suddenly and together, in the same bed.

The beep of my cell phone startled me. I flipped it open. "Yeah?"

"You all right, kid?" Dirk asked, his rich voice filling my mind with the image of his face. That was a phone-magic trick to give his words more power. I had worked on it a few times but didn't do it naturally yet.

"I've been better," I said.

"Come on back," Dirk said, the image of his face smiling at me in my mind. "I'm sorry about your grandparents. I'll help you get this worked out."

"I know you would," I said. "Thanks."

"The discover spells are not going to work," Dirk said, his mental image in my head frowning. "Not worth your time trying them anymore at your ability. They'll just get overwhelmed by your own memories, as you have discovered."

I felt stunned and sick to my stomach. I should have known that a powerful magician like Dirk would know everything his apprentice was doing. More than likely he knew my every thought.

"So besides coming back there, what can I do?"

"Nothing," Dirk said, his voice firm and seeming to echo in my mind. But it seemed a little too strong. Along the edges of the answer I could sense a half-truth. It was a skill I had picked up while working in corporate jobs. I tended to always know when someone wasn't telling me the entire truth. Dirk had told me it was part of my untrained magic power.

"You know that's not possible," I said. "At least not now. I need to know why this happened."

"It was an accident."

"If it was," I said, "I need to find out why. Something like this just doesn't happen to my grandparents. I was hoping my magic would help me understand."

"And it will, given time."

I stood, silent, thinking, listening to what wasn't being said more than what was. Finally, I told Dirk, "I've got one more thing to try, then I'll be back."

I snapped the phone closed before he could tell me not to do what I was thinking.

I felt very alone, as if by hanging up on him I had cut off a safety net that I needed to get through this. Or maybe that feeling was coming from the fact that my grandparents were gone. They had always been there for me, a sort of stable, safety net of human caring and love. They had always accepted me for what I was, never judged, never criticized. They had only given support and worried about me being well fed and healthy. Right now I was missing that support a great deal.

I stepped back up into the trailer and moved down the short hall to the bedroom. The imprints of their bodies on the bed seemed like ghosts to me. In this place they were still here, yet not. This was their private place. I had no memories in this room.

I eased along the tight space between the wall and the bed until I stood over impression that had been Grandma's final resting place. There was one spell I had read about online, but never asked Dirk about. All the apprentices I talked with had used it at one time or another to find people or things. I had not.

At least not until now.

I took a deep breath, leaned down and just before touching the place on the bed where my grandma used to sleep, I spelled the words, "f-i-n-d G-r-a-n-d-m-a."

I had no idea what a find spell would do when looking for a dead person. More than likely I would end up at the cemetery, but at least I had to try.

The tingling in my fingers snapped into a sharp pain in both arms that threatened to break bones and twist my wrists off. I snapped my eyes closed as the pain streamed up my arms, through my shoulders, and smashed into my head, knocking me back against the wall.

Then I found myself, the pain gone, in a beautiful rose garden that seemed to stretch forever. A woman was kneeling, her white hair in a bandanna, clipping at a bush.

"Grandma?" I said, knowing from the back that it was her.

She looked around, startled. "What?" She stood, dropping her clippers as she moved toward me.

It was clearly Grandma, only about twenty years younger and looking very healthy.

"Bob!" she shouted for my grandfather as she got near me. She had a very clear look of worry on her face. The last time I had seen that worry-look directed at me was the night she told me my father had died.

From behind a row of rosebushes my grandpa stood, shook his head, then laughed. He had a lit cigar in his mouth and a twinkle in his eyes.

"Where are you right now?" Grandma asked, clear worry in her voice.

I glanced around at the garden of fantastic roses. In the distance were tree-covered mountains. The air smelled fresh and slightly warm. "I don't recognize this place."

She shook her head as my grandpa moved up and stood beside her. "No, how did you get here?" she asked as she looked me directly in the eyes. "Where is your body?"

Now I was even more confused. I hadn't told them about my magic, or why I had moved to Arizona. So how would she know I was using magic to find her? Did that knowledge come after death?

"He's in our bedroom, I'll bet," Grandpa said. "Healthy as an ox."

I looked at him and nodded. "How did you know?"

Grandma looked relieved, checking me out as if I were a side of beef.

"Your finding spell is thin and unpracticed," she said. "That's how he knew."

Grandpa laughed and nodded.

"I can see it around the edges, dear," Grandma said to me, patting my hand. "That's all right, you'll get better."

Grandpa laughed. "And only an apprentice would use a finding spell to look for a dead person. I don't want to have your headache when you get back."

I stared at him, stunned at the words he had just said. Not only were they amazing, but it was the longest sentence I had heard him speak in twenty years.

"This is the first time he has ever tried this," Dirk said.

"He doesn't know there are better, and less painful, ways of getting here."

I spun around as my master walked up behind me. He was frowning, clearly not happy. And he looked very out of place in the rose garden with his golf shirt, slacks, and polished shoes.

"Gave him a boost, huh?" Grandpa said, chewing his cigar. "Good."

"Couldn't convince him to not come looking for us, could you?" Grandma asked Dirk, smiling as my master moved over and stood beside my grandparents.

At that moment I was more confused than I had ever been in my life. Clearly, I was imagining all this in my head. I hadn't really gone and found my dead grandparents. This was just my spell going wrong and my guilt at not following Dirk's instructions clogging up the vision.

"He's your grandson," Dirk said, laughing. "What do you think?"

Grandma laughed, her voice light and carried away on the breeze.

"Well, you found them," Dirk said to me. "Now can we get back to your training?"

I stared at him, then at the smiling faces of my grandparents. Nothing was making sense at all.

"I don't think he's ready to end this visit just yet," Grandma said. "Come on, I have some cherry pie cooling."

"Ice cream?" Dirk asked.

"For you," Grandma said, "always."

The next moment the garden was gone and I found myself with them back in the massive kitchen. Grandpa moved over and sat in one of the kitchen chairs. Dirk took another, leaving me to stand in the center of the big room with my mouth open and a thousand questions all jumbled together in my head.

"Sit down, dear," Grandma said. "I know you like cherry pie."

I looked at her as she worked to cut the pie. I had watched her as a kid do the same thing, in her old kitchen.

"Okay," I said, turning to face Dirk and my grandfather. "My memory is winning again, isn't it?" Then I realized just how silly I was talking to an image I was superimposing in an old memory.

"Actually, no," Dirk said, smiling at me. "You were here just a little bit ago."

"You were?" Grandma asked, surprised. "Well, good for you."

I nodded. "I sat in your chair and did a discover spell."

She laughed. "That would explain it. I came here a lot from that chair."

"And the old hunting camp?" I asked, glancing at Grandpa.

"All yours, that one," Grandpa said.

"Actually," Dirk said, "I blocked you on that spell, trying to get you to give up and let your grandparents get settled here in peace."

I looked at my master. "You can do that from Arizona?"

With that all three of them laughed. Obviously, there was a great deal I didn't know about magic. Then, finally, I realized what Grandma had said. She had come to this kitchen from her chair in the trailer.

"You both have magic powers?" I asked as Grandma put a piece of cherry pie in front of Dirk.

"Of course," Grandma said. "You get your talents from our side of the family."

Now I understood why they had been able to live in that small trailer all those years. They had this

world to come to, a cleaner, nicer version of their own past made up of memories and magic and a wonderful garden.

"Good pie, as always," Dirk said.

"You've had my grandmother's pie before?" I asked.

"In this kitchen dozens of times over the years."

Grandma eased me by the arm toward a chair at the table, then slid a piece of hot cherry pie in front of me as I sat.

"So you all have known each other?" I asked. I looked at my master. "That's how you found me in Seattle when the magic started?"

"Sure," Dirk said. "Your grandparents asked me to take you on and train you, as your grandfather did for me."

I looked in shock at my grandfather who only raised an eyebrow and then went back to eating. Dirk had been an apprentice of my grandfather? My mind was reeling.

"So have a bite to eat," Grandma said, patting my hand as she used to do when I was a young boy.

I eased a wonderful-tasting bite of cherry pie into my mouth and tried to get my thoughts in order. I still wasn't really believing that any of this was more than my mind making up what I wanted to feel and hear.

"So ask them your question, apprentice," Dirk said, "and you can get back to Arizona and back to your studies."

I looked at Dirk for a moment, trying to understand what question he meant, then it hit me. I looked at Grandma, then Grandpa. "Why did you die?"

Grandpa chuckled.

"Do we look dead to you, dear?" Grandma asked, smiling at me.

"I buried you this morning," I said, the images of those two caskets clear in my mind.

"You buried our bodies, dear," Grandma said.

"Nice funeral, too," Grandpa said, then took another bite of pie.

"We're right here, same as always," Grandma said.

"But what if this is all just part of my imagination?" I asked.

Again they all three chuckled, clearly understanding something about my question that I did not. And not understanding was making me more and more frustrated.

"Apprentice," Dirk said, "would it make a difference?"

"Yes," I said, disgusted at the question.

"Really?" Dirk said, pushing his empty pie plate away and facing me directly. Every time he did that, I knew I was in for a lesson. "When you were in Seattle, did you see your grandparents every day?"

"Of course not," I said. "But they were alive and I could—"

Dirk held up his hand for me to stop. "You could not see them or touch them, could you? They lived only in your memory when you were in Seattle. Correct?"

"But I could go see them, or call them."

"And what are you doing now, apprentice?" Dirk asked.

"Giving himself a hell of a headache," Grandpa said, then chuckled.

Dirk laughed as well.

"There is much to understand about your magic, dear," Grandma said. "And much to understand about life, both in the living and the dying. You will learn."

"I will see you in Scottsdale tomorrow," Dirk said.

With that the pain smashed through my head and I found myself slouched on my grandparents' bed. I lay there, hoping the pain would ease before I died. Slowly the pounding was replaced with a dull ache. But it was the ache of missing the two people I had cared most about in the world. I would never

again come to this trailer to talk with them, and I didn't believe in my own magic enough to really believe what I had just seen had reality to it.

I moved over into the center of the bed, so that I wouldn't be lying in either of their places. In the morning I would go back to Arizona and work with Dirk to figure out what had been real, what had been magic, and what had been a dream.

But for now I belonged here, where they had lived and died.

I closed my eyes and let my memories of them flood back in naturally.

And for the moment, that was as it should be.