

MRS. PARSELY VISITS THE BERGS

by Julian Padowicz

"Who on earth would be coming at this hour?" Mr. Berg said, putting his laptop aside and getting up to open the front door. It was just after nine, and Mrs. Berg was streaming a movie on her tablet, in the chair beside the fireplace. They were both warming themselves by their first fire of the fall, and Mr. Berg was, clearly, annoyed at the interruption.

"It's probably Hilda, next door," his wife said, not looking up from her movie. "She borrowed my blender this afternoon, and must be returning it."

"Don't people know not to bother people at this hour?" Mr. Berg said from the hallway.

"Not so loud, dear," Mrs. Berg said. "She'll hear you. And it could be something important."

What Mr. Berg saw, upon opening the door, was not Hilda from next door, but an elderly woman in a long skirt and a large and floppy red hat with flowers on it. Over her shoulders she had a short gray cape.

"Good evening," the woman began, but then stopped, brought her arm up to cover her mouth and nose and gave a loud sneeze. "Oh, I'm terribly sorry," she said. "My name is Mrs. Parsley, and..." Then she stopped for another sneeze. "May I... may I speak with Mrs. Berg, please?....It's rather important."

"Can I tell her what this is about?" Mr. Berg asked, because the woman looked strange, and he didn't want to bother his wife over something silly. But then he realized, that the woman's teeth were chattering and that her clothes were soaked through.

"Marion," he called back into the house, "this woman needs help!"

Mrs. Parsley sneezed two more times, into the crook of her elbow, then said, "It's about your son, Jeff. He lost a tooth this afternoon, you know."

When Mrs. Berg arrived to stand beside her husband, he said, "Mrs. Parsley is from the school. But look, she's soaked to the bone."

"Well, don't have her standing out in the cold, Sam," Mrs. Berg said. "Bring her inside, where she can get warm. I didn't realize it was raining." Then, to the woman, she said, "You must come in and warm up." Without waiting for an answer, she took Mrs. Parsley by the hand and began to lead her towards the living room fire.

"Oh, I don't know if I should," the woman was saying, as she followed Mrs. Berg towards the warmth. "Oh dear, they may need me to make more deliveries."

"Well, you can't go back out there, wet like that, Mrs. Presley. You'll get pneumonia. And I'm sure the school can find someone else to...."

"Oh, I'm not with the school, Mrs. Berg," the woman interrupted her, "And my name is Mrs. *Parsley*, not *Presley*. Margaret Parsley."

"Well you just sit here by the fire, Mrs. Parsley, while I get you a blanket for your knees."

"You're so kind, Mrs. Berg," the woman said. "I just have this..." But Marion Berg had left the room to fetch the blanket.

"Yes, what do you have there, Mrs. Presley?" Mr. Berg said, reaching for the green envelope Mrs. Parsley was now holding.

"My name is Mrs. Parsley, not Presley," she said again, "and this envelope is from the Tooth Fairy."

"The Tooth Fairy," Mr. Berg repeated, because he didn't believe that a Tooth Fairy existed. "I suppose you want me to put it under my son's pillow tonight."

First, Mrs. Parsley sniffled, then she said, "Yes, if you would. You or Mrs. Berg."

"It has always been my understanding," Mr. Berg said, in a rather sarcastic tone, as he took the envelope from her and placed it on the mantle, "that the Tooth Fairy did that herself."

Mrs. Parsley reached for a tissue in a box on the little table beside her, before responding. "May I?" she asked before pulling the tissue out.

"Help yourself," Mr. Berg said, and Mrs. Parsley took the tissue and blew her nose in it. "Well, of course she does that herself," she said, her nose still buried in the tissue, "when she can. But some nights there are just too many teeth for her to deal with by herself. Why, Danielle, in the next block, knocked a tooth out on the jungle gym, this very morning. Nights like that, I help out."

As she spoke, Mrs. Berg was tucking the blanket around Mrs. Parsley's knees.

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Berg, that feels so good," Mrs. Parsley said.

"Let me heat up some chicken soup," Mrs. Berg said.

"Oh, you needn't bother yourself about that. I'll just warm up a little here and be on my way."

"Do you have a car out front?" Mrs. Berg asked.

"No, Mrs. Berg, just my broom."

"Your broom," Mr. Berg repeated, because he didn't believe this either.

"No, Mrs. Parsley," Mrs. Berg said, "there is no way I can allow you to go out into that cold, soaked the way you are." Then she winked at her husband and headed to the kitchen.

Mr. Berg understood his wife's wink. She was going to call someone to come and take care of the poor woman. What he needed to do was make sure that she didn't run off in the meantime. He sat down in the chair on the other side of the fireplace. "So you substitute for the Tooth Fairy when she has more lost teeth to deal with than she can handle," he said, hoping to get her started in a long explanation so she wouldn't leave.

Mrs. Parsley sniffled again and said, "Well, of course the Tooth Fairy can come in through closed windows and things like that. But I can't do that. So I just wait till after the child is in bed and then ask the mother or father to place that envelope under their pillow, when they're asleep."

I thought you said that you traveled by broom," he said.

"Well, yes I do. That's how I got so soaked. Usually Laptop comes with me. She's my magic cat and makes sure I avoid rainstorms and things, but she had the darlinest kittens - five of them - on Tuesday, so she couldn't leave them, of course, and I got into the darndest storm over Kansas."

"Over Kansas?" Mr. Berg repeated to keep her talking.

"Yes, I had to come from Sandwich, you know."

"Sandwich?"

"Sandwich, Massachusetts. It's on Cape Cod, you know."

"Yes, I know," Mr. Berg said.

"Laptop would certainly have had us fly around it, but I don't know about those things."

"What things is that, Mrs. Parsley?"

"Oh, things like storms up ahead. I almost ran headlong into a mountain over Colorado. Oh, that fire feels so good, Mr. Berg. I'm almost dry already."

Then Mrs. Berg was back, carrying a mug of chicken soup. "Drink this down, Mrs. Parsley," she said. "It'll keep you from getting sick."

"You're both so kind to me," she said. "And this soup is delicious."

"It's my mother's recipe," Mrs. Berg said. "Actually, my grandmother's."

"Yes, old family recipes are the best....Of course, there are recipes in my family I wouldn't touch, 'eye of newt, tail of rat.' We're witches, you know... but that kind of magic is all in the past. Our recipes today are all for good things, like giving people pleasant dreams and understanding each other and so on."

"So you are a witch," Mr. Berg said.

"Oh yes, Mr. Berg. We help the Tooth Fairy and Santa Claus at Christmas, and I can't count how many fairy godmothers I've helped out over the years. But now, I think, I must be on my way. Thank you both for your hospitality and the delicious chicken soup."

"Oh no, Mrs. Parsley, you can't leave yet," Mrs. Berg said.

"That's right, you're still wet," Mr. Berg chimed in.

"Well, I'm really quite dry now, Mr. Berg. If you'll just allow me to borrow this blanket, I promise to have it washed and returned to..."

Mrs. Parsley stopped because the doorbell was ringing.

Mr. Berg looked at his wife and breathed a sigh of relief. Then he went to open the door. He was back a moment later accompanied by two men in white jackets. "That's her," he said, indicating Mrs. Parsley.

"What's this?" a startled Mrs. Parsley said.

Mrs. Berg was quick to reassure her. "They'll take you to a place where there's a nice warm bed and breakfast tomorrow, Mrs. Parsley."

"They're going to help you find your broom," Mr. Berg said.

"But I don't need help finding my broom," Mrs. Parsley protested. But the men in the white coats were already leading her to the front door.

Mr. and Mrs. Berg heard Mrs. Parsley say, "Thank you again for the chicken soup," as the door closed behind her.

"I called them when I was in the kitchen," Mrs. Berg said. "They'll take good care of her."

"I'm sure," her husband assured her. "She's really quite a nice old lady."

"Yes, she was rather sweet. I didn't have the heart to tell her that it's you, dear, who always puts the money under Jeff's pillow, when he loses a tooth."

"Me, Marion?" Mr. Berg said. "I thought it was you, who did that."

"No, no, it wasn't me."

"Not you, either. Well then.... I mean.... do you suppose she could really be....?" Mr. Berg didn't finish because it was just too unbelievable.

They both rushed to the front door.

Outside, the two men in white jackets were standing by their ambulance, looking off into the distance. "She really did have a broom out here," one of them said.

"Yeah," the other agreed. She just sat down on it, sideways, you know, like a lady, wrapped that blanket around herself, said goodbye, and off she sailed."