The Gratitude of Bones

by J.A. Pak

My maternal grandparents once owned a piece of land deep in the countryside. A couple of acres big enough to farm, surrounded by green hills and mountains. One day, my grandmother was digging in one of the fields when she uncovered a cache of bones. Human bones. This was a few years after the war and it wasn't unusual to stumble across bones struggling out of shallow graves. During the war, no one had had time to observe proper burial rites. So many people had died, the country in an uproar, people fleeing this way and that as they themselves tried to keep alive. During war, as in any terrible time of upheaval, burials are merely quick words and a scattering of dirt, if the dead are lucky. After all, the rites of death mimic the rites of life. Only when wars end and people once again find places to live and are granted the time to dream do they begin to preoccupy themselves with the comfort of the dead.

My grandmother sighed when she realized she'd dug up the cache of bones. How unlucky to disturb the dead, she thought. Supporting herself with her garden fork, she bent down and examined the sudden unearthing of misery.

The bones were long and fine, probably the bones of a woman, she thought, a woman unusually tall. Poor daughter, poor wife, poor mother. Taking pity, my grandmother gathered the bones and reburied them high up in the hills where they'd be safe from further disturbances. The reburial took a great deal of time and it was now near sunset. My grandmother said a quick prayer, wishing the dead peace, and hurried home. There was still so much to do before bedtime. That night, as always, she went to bed exhausted.

And then, when it was almost morning, before the sun had begun to rise, my grandmother received a second shock. She woke with a start to find a tall figure standing in her bedroom.

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/ja-pak/the-gratitude-of-bones--2»*
Copyright © 2012 J.A. Pak. All rights reserved.

My grandmother, thinking it was a burglar, was outraged. Jumping up, she screamed “Hey! You! Who do you think you are, walking into someone's house like this! Get out!”

In spite of my grandmother's hostile exhortation, the figure did not move but remained still and calm. My grandmother was now only about two feet away from the intruder and she was surprised by what she saw: the intruder was a woman, an unusually tall, regal woman dressed in fine clothing.

Quite unexpectedly, the woman began to bow, and she said to my grandmother: “I've come to thank you and to tell you that for as long as you live on this land, you will be happy.”

Before my grandmother could reply, the woman disappeared into the darkness.

Understandably shaken, my grandmother lit a gas lamp and walked out into the courtyard. Where had the woman gone, she wondered? And how had she gotten into the house? She decided to check the large front gate which sealed the house and courtyard from all intruders; she was certain that she had locked the gate before she'd gone to bed. Even deep in the countryside, it was unsafe to leave your house so vulnerable as to leave the front gate unlocked. But the gate was securely locked. No human being could have gotten into the house. *No human being*. That was when my grandmother knew she'd been visited by a ghost. The ghost of the bones she'd found. And the ghost had brought my grandmother a most wondrous gift: “For as along as you live on this land, you will be happy.”

The next morning, in time for breakfast, my grandfather finally came home after several days of carousing. Excited, my grandmother told my grandfather what had happened, how she had found the bones, how she had buried the bones high up in the green and peaceful hills, how the bones, in gratitude, had come to her in the middle of the night and had sown happiness into their land.

My grandfather scoffed. It'd just been a dream, he said dismissively, a dream of a stupid and silly woman: “Now leave me in peace and let me eat!”

Sadly, a few years later, my grandfather, in need of some quick cash, sold the land, thereby throwing away all that fertile happiness, as he did with so much else. He'd never been much of a farmer.