THE WOMAN WHO THOUGHT SHE COULD READ Avram Davidson

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Avram Davidson's ironic fantasies are treasures. He is a modern master, author of such novels as The Phoenix and the Mirror and the classic chronicles of Dr. Ezsterhazy. His stories have been praised by such luminaries as fantasy authors Peter S. Beagle and Damon Knight for being perhaps the best of all contemporary fantasies. He characteristically juxtaposes the supernatural or the magical with the naturalistic and gritty reality of contemporary life. This is a story about losing magic but it is still, somehow, an affirmation of wonder. One wants magic to redeem us. But the world stacks the deck against us and the magic is sometimes inadequate to the task in the face of common ignorance. This story offers an interesting contrast to Anne McCaffrey's "A Proper Santa Claus" (pp. 183-91).

About a hundred years ago a man named Vanderhorn built the little house. He built it one and a half stories high, with attached and detached sheds snuggling around it as usual; and he covered it with clapboards cut at his own mill—he had a small sawmill down at the creek, Mr. Vanderhorn did. After that he lived in the little house with his daughter and her husband (being a widower man) and one day he died there. So the daughter and son-in-law, a Mr. Hooten or Wooten or whatever it was, they came into his money which he made out of musket stocks for the Civil War, and they built a big new house next to the old one, only further back from the street. This Mr. Wooten or Hooten or something like that, *he* didn't have any sons, either; and *his* son-in-law turned the sawmill into a buggy factory. Well, you know what happened to *that* business! Finally, a man named Carmichael, who made milk wagons and baggage carts and piewagons, he bought the whole Vanderhorn estate. He fixed up the big house and put in apartments, and finally he sold it to my father and went out of business. Moved away somewhere.

I was just a little boy when we moved in. My sister was a lot older. The *old* Vanderhorn house wasn't part of the property any more. A lady named Mrs. Grummick was living there and Mr. Carmichael had sold her all the property the width of her house from the street on back to the next lot which faced the street behind ours. I heard my father say it was one of the narrowest lots in the city, and it was separated from ours by a picket fence. In the front of the old house was an old weeping willow tree and a big lilac bush like a small tree. In back were a truck garden and a few flowerbeds. Mrs. Grummick's house was so near to our property that I could look right into her window, and one day I did, and she was sorting beans.

Mrs. Grummick looked out and smiled at me. She had one of those broad faces with high cheekbones, and when she smiled her little bright black eyes almost disappeared.

"Liddle boy, hello!" she said. I said Hello and went right on staring, and she went right on sorting her beans. On her head was a kerchief (you have to remember that this was before they became fashionable) and there was a tiny gold earring in each plump earlobe. The beans were in two crocks on the table and in a pile in front of her. She was moving them around and sorting them into little groups. There were more crocks on the shelves, and glass jars, and bundles of herbs and strings of onions and peppers and bunches of garlic all hanging around the room. I looked through the room and out the window facing the street and there was a sign in front of the little house, hanging on a sort of one-armed gallows. *Anastasia Grummick, Midwife*, it said.

"What's a midwife?" I asked her.

"Me," she said. And she went on pushing the beans around, lining them up in rows, taking some from one place and putting them in another.

"Have you got any children, Mrs. Grummick?"

"One. I god one boy. Big boy." She laughed.

"Where is he?"

"I think he come home today. I know he come home today." Her head bobbed.

"How do you know?"

"I know because I know. He come home and I make a bean soup for him. You want go errand for me?"

"All right." She stood up and pulled a little change purse out of her apron pocket, and counted out some money and handed it to me out of the window.

"Tell butcher Mrs. Grummick want him to cut some meat for a bean soup. He knows. Mr. Schloutz. And you ged iche-cream comb with nickel, for you."

I started to go, but she gave me another nickel. "Ged *two* iche-cream combs. I ead one, too." She laughed. "One, too. One, two, three—Oh, Englisht languish!" Then she went back to the table, put part of the beans back in the crocks, and swept the rest of them into her apron. I got the meat for her and ate my French vanilla and then went *off* to play.

A few hours later a taxicab stopped in front of the little gray house and a man got out of it. A big fellow. Of course, to a kid, all grown-ups are real big, but he was *very* big—tremendous, he was, across, but not so tall. Mrs. Grummick came to the door.

"Eddie!" she said. And they hugged and kissed, so I decided this was her son, even before he called her "Mom."

"Mom," he said, "do I smell bean soup?"

"Just for you I make it," she said.

He laughed. "You knew I was coming, huh? You been reading them old beans again, Mom?" And they went into the house together.

I went home, thinking. My mother was doing something over the washtub with a ball of bluing. "Mama," I said, "can a person read beans?"

"Did you take your milk of magnesia?" my mother asked. Just as if I hadn't spoken. "Did you?"

I decided to bluff it out. "Uh-huh," I said.

"Oh no you didn't. Get me a spoon."

"Well, why do you ask if you ain't going to believe me?"

"Open up," she ordered. "More. Swallow it. Take the rest. All of it. If you could see your face! Suppose it froze and stayed like that? Go and wash the spoon off."

Next morning Eddie was down in the far end of the garden with a hoe. He had his shirt off. Talk about shoulders! Talk about arms! Talk about a chest! My mother was out in front of our house, which made her near Eddie's mother out in back of hers. Of course my mother had to know everybody's business.

"That your son, Mrs. Grummick?"

"My son, yes."

"What does he do for a living?"

"Rachel."

"No, I mean your son ... what does he do ... "

"He rachel. All over country. I show you."

She showed us a picture of a man in trunks with a hood over his head. "The Masked Marvel! Wrestling's Greatest Mystery!" The shoulders, arms, and chest—they could only have been Eddie's. There were other pictures of him in bulging poses, with names like, oh, The Slav Slayer, Chief Thunderwing, Young Kehoe, and so on. Every month Eddie Grummick sent his mother another photograph. It was the only kind of letter he sent because she didn't know how to read English. Or any other language, for that matter.

Back in the vegetable patch Eddie started singing a very popular song at that time, called "I Faw Down And Go *Boom!*"

It was a hot summer that year, a long hot summer, and September was just as hot as July. One shimmering, blazing day Mrs. Grummick called my father over. He had his shirt off and was sitting under our tree in his BVD top. We were drinking lemonade.

"When I was a kid," he said, "we used to make lemonade with brown sugar and sell it in the streets. We used to call out

Brown lemonade Mixed in the shade Stirred by an old maid.

"People used to think that was pretty funny."

Mrs. Grummick called out: "Hoo-hoo! Mister! Hoo-hoo!"

"Guess she wants me," my father said. He went across the lawn.

"Yes ma'am ... " he was saying. "Yes ma'am." She asked, "You buy coal yed, mister?" *"Coal?* Why, no-o-o ... not *yet*. Looks like a pretty mild winter ahead, wouldn't you say?" She pressed her lips together, closed her eyes and shook her head.

"No! Bedder you buy soon coal. Lots coal. Comes very soon bad wedder. Bad!"

My father scratched his head. "Why, you sound pretty certain, Mrs. Grummick, but-uh-"

"I know, mister. If I say id, if I tell you, I know."

Then I piped up and asked, "Did you read it in the beans, Mrs. Grummick?"

"Hey!" She looked at me, surprised. "How you know, liddle boy?"

My father said, "You mean you can tell a bad winter is coming from the beans?"

"Iss true. I know. I read id."

"Well, now, that's very interesting. Where I come from, used to be a man—a weather prophet, they called him—*he* used to predict the weather by studying skunk stripes. Said his grandfather'd learned it from the Indians. How wide this year, how wide last year. Never failed. So you use beans?"

So I pushed my oar in and I said, "I guess you don't have the kind of beans that the man gave Jack for the cow and he planted them and they were all different colors. Well, a beanstalk grew way way up and he climbed—"

Father said, "Now don't bother Mrs. Grummick, sonny," but she leaned over the fence and picked me up and set me down on her side of it.

"You, liddle boy, come in house and tell me. You, mister: buy coal."

Mrs. Grummick gave me a glass of milk from the nanny goat who lived in one of the sheds, and a piece of gingerbread, and I told her the story of Jack and the beanstalk. Here's a funny thing—she believed it. I'm sure she did. It wasn't even what the kids call Making Believe, it was just a pure and simple belief. Then she told *me* a story. This happened on the other side, in some backwoods section of Europe where she came from. In this place they used to teach the boys to read, but not the girls. They figured, what did they need it for? So one day there was this little girl, her brothers were all off in school and she was left at home sorting beans. She was supposed to pick out all the bad beans and the worms, and when she thought about it and about everything, she began to cry.

Suddenly the little girl looked up and there was this old woman.

She asked the kid how come she was crying. Because all the boys can learn to read, but not me. Is *that* all? the old lady asked.

Don't cry, she said. I'll teach you how to read, only not in books, the old lady said. Let the *men* read books, books are new things, people could read before there were books. Books tell you what *was*, but you'll be able to tell you what's *going* to be. And this old lady taught the little girl how to read

the beans instead of the books. And I kind of have a notion that Mrs. Grummick said something about how they once used to read *bones*, but maybe it was just her accent and she meant beans ...

And you know, it's a funny thing, but, now, if you look at dried beans, you'll notice how each one is maybe a little different shape or maybe the wrinkles are a little different. But I was thinking that, after all, an "A" is an "A" even if it's big or small or twisted or ...

But that was the story Mrs. Grummick told me. So it isn't remarkable, if she could believe *that* story, she could easily believe the Jack and the Beanstalk one. But the funny thing was, all that hot weather just vanished one day suddenly, and from October until almost April we had what you might call an ironbound winter. Terrible blizzards one right after another. The rivers were frozen and the canals were frozen and even the railroads weren't running and the roads were blocked more than they were open. And coal? Why, you just couldn't *get* coal. People were freezing to death right and left. But Mrs. Grummick's little house was always warm and it smelled real nice with all those herbs and dried flowers and stuff hanging around in it.

A few years later my sister got married. And after that, in the summertime, she and her husband Jim used to come back and visit with us. Jim and I used to play ball and we had a fine time—they didn't have any children, so they made much of me. I'll always remember those happy summers.

Well, you know, each summer, a few of the churches used to get together and charter a boat and run an excursion. All the young couples used to go, but my sister always made some excuse. See, she was always afraid of the water. This particular summer the same thing happened, but her friends urged her to come. My brother-in-law, he didn't care one way or the other. And then, with all the joking, someone said, Let's ask Mrs. Grummick to read it in the beans for us. It had gotten known, you see. Everybody laughed, and more for the fun of it than anything else, I suppose, they went over and spoke to her. She said that Sister and Jim could come inside, but there wasn't room for anybody else. So we watched through the window.

Mrs. Grummick spread her beans on the table and began to shove them around here and there with her fingers. Some she put to one side and the rest she little by little lined up in rows. Then she took from one row and added to another row and changed some around from one spot to another. And meanwhile, mind you, she was muttering to herself, for all the world like one of these old people who reads by putting his finger on each word and mumbling it. And what was the answer?

"Don't go by the water. "

And that was all. Well, like I say, my sister was just looking for any excuse at all, and Jim didn't care. So the day of the excursion they went off on a picnic by car. I'd like to have gone, but I guess they sort of wanted to be by themselves a bit and Jim gave me a quarter and I went to the movies and bought ice-cream and soda.

I came out and the first thing I saw was a boy my own age, by the name of Bill Baumgardner, running down the street crying. His shirt was out and his nose was running and he kept up an awful grinding kind of howl. I called to him but he paid no attention. I still don't know where he was running from or where to and I guess maybe he didn't know either. Because he'd been told, by some old fool who should've known better, that the excursion boat had caught on fire, with his parents on it. The news swept through town and almost everybody with folks on the boat was soon in as bad a state as poor Billy.

First they said everybody was burned or drowned or trampled. Later on it turned out to be not that bad—but it was bad enough.

Oh, my folks were shook up, sure enough, but it's easier to be calm when you know it's not your own flesh and blood. I recall hearing the church clock striking six and my mother saying, "I'll never laugh at Mrs. Grummick again as long as I live." Well, she never did.

Almost everyone who had people on the boat went up the river to where it had finally been run ashore, or else they waited by the police station for news. There was a deaf lady on our street, I guess

her daughter got tired of its being so dull at home and she'd lied to her mother, told her she was going riding in the country with a friend. So when the policeman came and told her—shouted at her they'd pulled out the girl's body, she didn't know what he was talking about. And when she finally understood she began to scream and scream.

The policeman came over toward us and my mother said, "I'd better get over there," and she started out. He was just a young policeman and his face was pale. He held up his hand and shook his head. Mother stopped and he came over. I could hear how hard he was breathing. Then he mentioned Jim's name.

"Oh, no," my mother said, very quickly. "They didn't *go* on the boat." He started to say something and she interrupted him and said, "But I tell you, they didn't *go*—" and she looked around, kind of frantically, as if wishing someone would come and send the policeman away.

But no one did. We had to hear him out. It was Sister and Jim, all right. A big truck had gotten out of control ("—but they didn't go on the boat," my mother kept repeating, kind of stupidly. "They had this warning and so—") and smashed into their car. It fell off the road into the canal. The police were called right away and they came and pulled it out. ("Oh, *oh*! Then they're all *right!"* my mother cried. *Then* she was willing to understand.) But they weren't all right. They'd been drowned.

So we forgot about the deaf neighbor lady because my mother, poor thing, *she* got hysterical. My father and the policeman helped her inside and after a while she just lay there on the couch, kind of moaning. The door opened and in tiptoed Mrs. Grummick. She had her lower lip tucked in under her teeth and her eyes were wide and she was kind of rocking her head from side to side. In each hand she held a little bottle—smelling salts, maybe, and some kind of cordial. I was glad to see her and I think my father was. I *know* the policeman was, because he blew out his cheeks, nodded very quickly to my father, and went away.

Mother said, in a weak, thin voice: "They didn't go on the boat. They didn't go because they had a warning. That's why—" Then she saw Mrs. Grummick. The color came back to her face and she just leaped off the couch and tried to hit Mrs. Grummick, and she yelled at her in a hoarse voice I'd never heard and called her names—the kind of names I was just beginning to find out what they meant. I was, I think, more shocked and stunned to hear my mother use them than I was at the news that Sister and Jim were dead.

Well, my father threw his arms around her and kept her from reaching Mrs. Grummick and I remember I grabbed hold of one hand and how it tried to get away from me.

"You *knew!*" my mother shouted, struggling, her hair coming loose. "You knew! You read it there, you witch! And you didn't tell! You didn't tell! She'd be alive now if she'd gone on the boat. They weren't all killed, on the boat—But you didn't say a *word*!"

Mrs. Grummick's mouth opened and she started to speak. She was so mixed up, I guess, that she spoke in her own language, and my mother screamed at her.

My father turned his head around and said, "You'd better get out."

Mrs. Grummick made a funny kind of noise in her throat. Then she said, "But,

Lady—mister—no—I tell you only what I see—I read there, 'Don't go by the water.' I only can say what I see in front of me, only what I read. Nothing else. Maybe it mean one thing or maybe another. I only can read it. Please, lady—"

But we knew we'd lost them, and it was because of her.

"They ask me," Mrs. Grummick said. "They ask me to read."

My mother kind of collapsed, sobbing. Father said, "Just get out of here. Just turn around and get out."

I heard a kid's voice saying, high, and kind of trembling, "We don't want you here, you old witch! *We hate you!"*

Well, it was *my* voice. And then her shoulders sagged and she looked for the first time like a real old woman. She turned around and shuffled away. At the door she stopped and half faced us. "I read no more," she said. "I never read more. Better not to know at all." And she went out.

Not long after the funeral we woke up one morning and the little house was empty. We never heard where the Grummicks went and it's only now that I begin to wonder about it and to think of it once again.