

JACK STRAW

By Midori Snyder

Appears here with the kind permission of the author.

THE FIRST TIME I saw Jack Straw was in the winter. I was sick. Very sick. Mama had kept me home from school, just hoping the fever I'd caught would take care of itself. That week there was a blizzard, and the snow would pile up in huge, white drifts beneath my window. The thermometer outside kept dropping, while the one in my mouth just went higher. Mama wasn't sure which way to go, keep me dry at home and hope for the best, or take me out in the damp cold and risk the long drive from our farm to the hospital. I heard her talking one night to Daddy and Granny Frank. "Just wait a little longer," Daddy had said, "just wait a little longer." So they waited, one after another in my bedroom, sitting in the old rocking chair and watching for hopeful signs. Granny Frank's knitting needles clicked and clicked like a worried bug caught on the window pane.

Funny thing about being sick. The worse off you are, the less you're able to tell folks. *I knew* I wasn't doing good at all. Beneath the blankets they'd piled on me for warmth, my bones rattled with the chills. I couldn't breathe too well neither — each time I drew in air it felt sticky, and each time I let air out, it sort of oozed up my throat and wheezed. I couldn't tell Mama that nothing in the room looked the same. The petals on the wallpaper daisies were turning brown, and I could see them peeling off the wall and floating down to the floor. The hollow sounds of the wind against the pane made me see big white dogs, their hairy faces crowding my bed, steaming up the room with their curdling breath.

Only thing that seemed to hold me firm in the bed was my quilt. Mama made it for me when I was little out of all the pieces left over in Granny Frank's rag-bag. It was beautiful, and I knew where each piece had come from. The blue polka dot was Aunt Anna's dress that she wore to meet Uncle George when he came back from the war. The red-and-white-striped bit was from Granny Frank's confirmation dress,

and the green silk triangles were Great–Grandma Jenny’s riding dress, made from imported fabric. There was a yellow–flowered calico that was Mama’s when she was a teenager, and there was square of white–and–pink apples that was mine when I was a baby. I liked to think about all those women saving those bits and pieces of themselves, never wasting a thing if they could turn it to another purpose. After Mama had pieced it all together, Granny Frank sewed fancy stitches around each piece, setting each one off with its own frame of embroidery.

I was holding tight to my quilt, just praying that the blue polka dots would stop rolling off the fabric, when Jack Straw came up to the bed. I looked up, feeling the cold draft and saw him step out of a mist into the moonlight that fell across the room.

He had his hands stuck in the pockets of a pair of old overalls, and a battered hat with a torn brim was pulled low over his face.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Jack. Jack Straw,” he answered, and I felt the chill creep over my spine at the dry sound.

He looked like a scarecrow, old corn stalks tied together and dressed like a man. When he moved he rustled, and the mist sort of followed after him, rising off his hunched shoulders.

“I don’t know you,” I said weakly, struggling to sit up and all the while pulling my quilt higher to my chin.

“Everyone knows me,” he said, and pushed back his hat to show me his face.

Thin it was, with a nose that hooked down sharply trying to reach his chin. He smiled, and the creases in his cheeks folded at the scratchy sound.

He was right. As soon as I saw those white eyes, with shining black stones for a center, I knew him. Granny Frank told me once about old Jack Straw, shuffling through the fields on his way to harvest. But it wasn’t crops he raked in, it was people. Right then I knew I was dying, even though my heart pounded like a drum and blood heated up my face like a furnace fire.

He pulled a hand from his pocket and reached out to me. Fingers of bundled sticks went to pluck the quilt from me, but I clutched it tighter, refusing to let go.

“I ain’t going with you,” I said angrily.

“No point in your refusing,” he answered, and stepped closer to take a firmer hold of the quilt. The cold mist swirled toward me, and I felt its icy touch on my forehead.

“No!” I yelled, and then “Mama!” I called for her where she was sitting in the chair, still sleeping. She didn’t stir, and for one awful moment I feared Jack Straw had already taken me.

“Now wait here, Jack Straw,” I said, yanking my quilt back from his spindly fingers. In my panicked thinking I had remembered something Granny Frank had told me about Jack Straw. “I’ll make you a bargain.”

He frowned at me, eyes narrowed. Ever so slowly, he slipped his hand back into his pocket and stood, rocking on his heels. Thinking, I guessed.

“What sort of bargain?”

“I’ll riddle you one, and if you can’t guess, then I get to keep my life.”

“Forever?” he asked with a sneer, and I noticed now that his teeth were sharp and jagged.

“No,” I answered, shaking my head. “Just the usual span of time.”

He laughed as if I’d said something really funny.

“There ain’t no season in which I can’t harvest, ain’t no span of time that’s usual.”

“Not for you maybe, but for me there is. I got things I want to do,” I argued. “I still got a life I want to live.”

Jack Straw sat on the bed with a whispery noise like the wind shaking the stooks in the field.

“All right,” he said. “Give me your riddle.”

All the while I had been trying to convince Jack Straw to bargain, I’d been desperately trying to think of a good riddle. I figured he’s probably heard every one ever given out, so I knew it had to be a riddle only I knew, that only I had cause to make happen right then. I stared down at that old quilt, Granny Frank’s stitches like silver tracks in the moonlight, and tried to think.

“Give me your riddle,” he said again, and this time I heard the spreading coldness in his voice.

It came to me all of a moment, and in that same moment I felt the fear go out of me. I looked from the quilt and stared straight into his dry, crackling face. “I’ll riddle it to you,” I started, just like Granny Frank did in the story, and I saw him straighten his back in expectation. “I died in pieces and was reborn whole. I followed the road over ridges and valleys but never moved.”

I held my breath as I watched him figure the riddle. He didn’t move, but stayed there black eyed and rigid. The cold mist was settling around my bed, and a drop of it trickled down the side of my face. But I couldn’t move, couldn’t take my eyes from him.

Then with a snarl he sprang up from my bed, The wind howled outside and rattled the panes as if to break them. Hands upraised over his head, Jack Straw called to the howling wind. The mist thickened in the room, and the white dogs were there beside him, snapping and baying. Hoarfrost cobwebbed across my quilt as Jack Straw shook his raggedy arms at me in fury. I screamed then, fearing he meant to take me, though he’d not given me my answer.

But the scream was scarce from my mouth when he disappeared, and it was Mama who reached out to take me, her arms sleep warm and soft.

“Hush now, hush,” she whispered in my ear. “You’re dreaming, Katie,” she said. “You’re dreaming. Mama’s right here.” She held me tight, and after a bit I felt my fear thaw and stopped shaking.

And even though I knew she was wrong, that I hadn’t been dreaming, I let her lay me back on the pillows and tuck in the blankets around me again. She bent over and kissed me, one hand pushing back the wet hair from my forehead.

“My quilt,” I whispered to her proudly, and saw her look of confusion.

“Your quilt’s here, honey,” she said to soothe me.

“No,” I said. “That’s the answer to my riddle.”

“Sure it is,” she murmured. She thought I was talking in my sleep, still dreaming. But it didn’t matter. The truth was I was still alive because I had beaten Jack Straw.

Just before I fell back to sleep, I heard her talking in low whispers to Daddy. “She’s gonna be fine,” I heard her say. “Looks like the fever is breaking.” Daddy mumbled something. Mama answered. “No, just dreaming, I guess. She’s sleeping good now. I think the worst’s over.”

And in my bed, half asleep, I thought so, too.

But the worst wasn't over. Somehow it had only just begun.

I stayed in bed another five days and then went back to school. I had five days of lying in my bed to think over what had happened. Oh, I was happy to be alive, to be waking up each day and watching the sun shine through my windows, lighting up the white daisies on my wallpaper. Everything was just as it had been before I got sick. And that scared me. I had sent Jack Straw on his way. But I got to thinking I was going to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder, waiting for him to sneak up on me. And the thought of that dry face, those long spindly arms reaching out to grab me when I wasn't looking, made my victory seem cold.

"Look at your face," Granny Frank said on the morning I got up to eat breakfast before going to school.

"What's the matter with it?" I asked

"It's screwed tight. Grim as a soldier's. Where's that smile of yours, child?"

"It's there," I snapped, and then felt bad for being cross with her. "I just don't feel like smiling," I said more softly.

"Worried about school?"

"Uh-huh," I answered, because it was easier than telling her the truth.

"It'll be fine," she said, picking up her knitting. "You'll be caught up in no time."

But school wasn't fine. It was terrible. Things had changed while I was out sick. They had painted the halls a new white with a blue stripe down the middle of the wall to hide where everybody's hand sort of naturally drags and leaves a dirty smear. The posters on my classroom wall had all been changed, the map showed we were studying a new continent, and the desks had been rearranged. People had changed too. My best friend, Mary Beth, came up to me as soon as I got into school and gave me a big hug. I didn't recognize her at first because she'd gone and cut her beautiful long red braids and curled her hair. So instead of being happy to see her, I was mad.

"Why'd you cut your hair?" I yelled.

"Looks better this way," she said, tossing back the short curls. "More grown-up."

"What's so good about growing up?" I said angrily. "You just die anyway."

Mary Beth opened her mouth and then shut it again without saying anything. She waited a few moments, maybe to see if I'd come to my senses and say something nice. But I didn't, so she turned on her heel and left me standing there in that new-painted hallway.

Everything new made me scared, made me tremble. Change was the enemy that stole away my hard-won victory and left me open to the next coming of Jack Straw. I wanted time just to stop, for everything and everyone to stay safe in its place. But the world isn't like that, is it? It just keeps on going, and I knew that sooner or later Jack Straw would come around again to me. So every day when I left for school, I felt the fear draw tighter and tighter around me as I tried to shut my eyes and ears to the changes. Granny Frank was right in calling me a grim soldier, because I faced each new thing like a battle. Even my own riddle came back to haunt me, for like Granny Frank's stitches, I followed a road over hills and valleys, but never moved.

Whatever illness it was that took me came again and caught Daddy. I found him one day in the barn, just leaning his head against the old cow, too sick with fever to stand. His breathing was harsh, and his eyes burned a fiery red. I helped him to the house and into bed. For two weeks after school and at night, I stood guard over him, waiting lest Jack Straw come to take him. Daddy thrashed with fevered dreams, and his cries wrenched me from the rocking chair to my feet in terror. But the fever broke, and except for a terrible cough that lingered, he mended.

Mama got it next, and for a second time I stood my guard, certain this time Jack Straw was playing with me. Punishing me for beating him. I sat next to her bed, put cool cloths on her head, and held her hand while she struggled with the fever. When Granny Frank tried to get me to leave and have a rest of my own, I refused. I was so scared that if I moved one foot from that room while Mama was sick, Jack Straw would come for sure and take her behind my back. The first thing Mama did when she felt the fever come down was to order me to bed. Only then did I leave her side.

I hardly noticed when winter changed and became wet spring. I had spent so much time worrying and fretting about things out of my hands that I walked around ragged and worn as Jack Straw himself. The face I saw in the mirror was haggard, my eyes dark gray with purple smudges beneath. My hair had lost its shine, and my mouth

was a sour frown. No wonder my friends shied away from me at school, talking in whispers when I passed like some spook down the halls.

They couldn't know how heavy my burden felt, for with the spring Granny Frank took sick with the fever. And with each day that she got weaker and weaker, my burden grew until I felt I could no longer lift my head with the weight of so much dread. Granny Frank would smile at me, pat my hand, and tell me it was all right. "Everything's got a season," she would say. I didn't understand her then and thought she meant the coming spring. Then one night I heard her singing in a tiny, sweet voice a song about spooning in the moonlight. She seemed so happy I thought maybe she'd been spared after all. But when I came closer and touched her head, I knew it wasn't so. Her forehead was hot and dry. Her eyes stared out, not seeing me, but set on some happier memory. I took her hand and clutched it tight.

A cold draft swept through the room. Looking up I saw Jack Straw standing in the corner, just as before, with his hat pulled down and his hands stuck into his pockets.

"No!" I shouted at him. "You can't have her!"

He pushed his hat back, and his face was wrinkled with sadness. "You mean to keep this one from me, too?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Is that what she wants, or what you want?"

"Makes no difference." I stamped my foot like a child.

"Ask her then," he said.

I turned to look down at Granny Frank and bit back a cry. She had stopped singing and was lying quietly, peaceful as a sleeper. By the light of a small lamp I saw suddenly how tiny and frail she had become in the last few days. And how old. Her skin had lost its color, growing pale and yellow like the husk of the corn dollies she used to make. Her white hair was tangled as dried corn silk.

"Do you still want to riddle me, Katie?" Jack Straw asked, his voice no louder than the rustle of leaves.

I didn't answer. There was nothing to say. I realized then that just as I couldn't stop things from changing in life, I couldn't keep Granny Frank from her appointed death. I bowed my head eyes squeezed shut, and clung to Granny Frank's hand. She

squeezed back once, her grip firm as if to give me strength. And then her hand went limp. I shuddered as the cold draft circled my shoulders. When the room grew warm again, I knew she was gone with Jack Straw. And then I cried, cried hard, grief breaking like a branch within me.

We buried Granny Frank on a beautiful spring morning. From cemetery hill I could see down into the pockets of fields newly plowed, the mist rising like steam from the earth. The air was soft and warm, full of promise, as crocus and daffodil buds swelled and burst open with color.

I was done crying, though I wore the sadness of Granny Frank's death like a long-needed relief. I had been so long frozen that Granny Frank's passing took me like a field set to by the plow blade. I was wounded, cut open, and yet, in the furrow left by her death I also felt released. I looked up across the open grave into which they lowered Granny Frank's casket and saw Jack Straw one more time. He was standing between the preacher, who was saying the words, and Mrs. Johnson, who jiggled her new baby to keep him from fussing. He didn't look so frightening to me anymore now that I knew him. He looked over and gave me a sad, weathered smile, like he was satisfied with what he had done and sorry at the pain it had caused me.

Then he tipped me his hat in farewell and started ambling off toward the fields. I watched him as he went, like a freed scarecrow with his long, lanky body of dried yellowed stalks. And just before the mist swallowed him, I caught a glimpse of faint shimmering green as the new rye grass resurrected in the fields around him.