

Dawna Ray and the High Man

by Janie Meneely

When Dawna Ray was born, first girl child on the island inside thirty years, it was cause for celebration. Dawna Ray's parents—Captain Pete and Miss Lottie--sent out invitations to everyone in the district, and Granny Lee (that would be Dawna Ray's grandmother) announced it at church bingo. "Come to a party," they all said, "for Dawna Ray, the sweetest, smartest, prettiest girl baby on the island. Come see her," they said, "and wish her well."

And come they did. On foot, on bicycle and by boat, families puffed and panted and pattered from across the harbor and across the island just to get a glimpse of that baby girl—so rosie and bright, they said, she was named Dawna Ray for the morning sun. One by one they paraded by her cradle and cooed and grinned and chucked her on the chin, while Captain Pete and Miss Lottie stood beaming by. And that would have been that except all of a sudden, who should come busting through the door but Shadbush, the local high man, the island conjurer himself, draped in magic and dripping venom.

"A party?" he said. "And where's my invitation?" His voice crackled like fat on a fire.

He looked Captain Pete square in the face so their noses nearly touched. Then he swiveled his head around and glared at Miss Lottie.

Now Shadbush was a good one for glaring. He had eagle tight eyes and a long beak of a nose that seemed to channel his vision straight into anything he looked at, as if his view was a target and his just looking was a bullet.

"And where's my invitation, I'd like to know?" he said again, his eyes going off like a duck blind at dawn.

Granny Lee harrumphed so's to break his stare. "Musta been misplaced," she said. "So nice to see you," she added. "We're so glad you came." (Granny's manners were slick as goose grease.)

Shadbush drew himself up into all his five-foot-three-inch glory. "We'll see about that," he said, and he strode over to the baby's crib and peered in. As he passed, the islanders peeled back with fear, their backs flat against the parlor wall. Shadbush wasn't just any old nickel-a-crack high man. He was a fearsome, ferocious, crafty little bugger who would charm the whistle off a catbird just to be mean. His potions were powerful. His magic was mighty. And the islanders were in his thrall tighter than clawmeat in a buster crab.

He leered at Dawna Ray while she cooed and gurgled and grabbed at his nose with her little pink fist. Then Shadbush pulled a small glass vial from his vest pocket and yanked the cork with his snarly teeth. "I have something for you, my sweet," he said, and he dribbled a sticky gloppy syrupy mess from the vial straight onto the baby's plump cheeks, chanting all the while: "Bat fat and pig eyes, devilled cornbread, when you're sixteen you'll drop down dead!"

Dawna Ray laughed like she'd been tickled and gave old Shadbush a swat on the nose. Captain Pete gasped and Miss Lottie fainted dead away. The islanders pushed back tighter against the parlor wall and held their breath for fear.

“Nonsense,” Granny Lee said, pushing Shadbush away and dabbing at the sticky mess with her dishtowel. “Let’s eat.”

Shadbush didn’t hang around for the food. He wasn’t much for socializing, and he slunk through the porch door and let the screen slam behind him. “You’ll see,” he snickered as he headed down the road. “Just you wait! Sixteen years will fly by faster than bats in August.”

“What’re we gonna do?” Miss Lottie wailed when she came to. “Shadbush done cursed our baby girl!”

“It’s a shame,” the islanders said.

“Tut tut,” said Granny Lee, wiping her hands on her apron. “Don’t you believe it.”

“Believe it?” said Miss Lottie. “We saw it with our own eyes!”

Granny Lee poked at a drop of magic that had dribbled behind the baby’s ear and gave it a studied sniff. Then she licked it thoughtfully from her finger. “Devil eyes and hog swallow,” she said, “this is a potent brew. But not to worry. A spell is only as powerful as the pot that poured it. More potato salad, anyone?”

When the last muffin had been eaten with the last of the blackberry preserves, when the last lick of potato salad had been fingered from the bowl, when the last whisker of baked ham had been shaved off the bone and the islanders had all left for home, Captain Pete took Miss Lottie’s hand and said, “I have a plan. It’s just like Granny Lee said. A spell is only as powerful as the conjure kettle that brewed it. We just need a conjure pot that’s bigger and more powerful than the one Shadbush used. Shouldn’t be all that hard a thing to find. And we’ve got sixteen years, starting now.”

“Why not start right here with the pots in your own kitchen,” Granny Lee said. “They’ve got as much magic as anything else you’ll find.” But Captain Pete and Miss Lottie knew better. Every now and then they would leave little Dawna Ray with Granny Lee and go off on a kettle hunt. They went to auctions, to estate sales, to junk stores and to flea markets. If ever they saw something that smacked of magic they’d fork over their cash and haul it back to their kitchen where they’d turn it over to Granny Lee for testing.

“Tut tut,” Granny Lee would say, “I wouldn’t even make chowder in a pot like this.”

And one by one all those kettles landed in a big rusting pile in the back yard.

Meanwhile, Dawna Ray grew prettier and prettier and feistier and feistier. Her little baby curls turned into long curly locks. Her little rosie baby lips turned into a sweet rosie smile. And she was tough as duck’s feet. When the kids at school told her about Shadbush’s curse she laughed out loud. “Ain’t nobody gonna conjure me,” she said. “I’ll conjure him right back, so there.”

She’d sneak down to Shadbush’s conjure shack to spy on his nefarious doings. She peeked through a knothole and watched as he ground walnut husks into the paste he gave Mrs. Pritchett to cure her chest cold. She saw him pour whiskey and blackberry juice into the potion he gave Mr. Willy for his rheumatiz. When old Sid Lawson asked for a good luck tonic, she saw Shadbush siphon a mix of hard cider and egg yokes into Mr. Sid’s pocket flask. She knew for a fact that Shadbush poured nothing but old lemon juice in the harbor the time he bewitched the tide.

“Let the waters rise!” Shadbush had commanded, throwing his arms wide as gulls wings and crooking his head to the sky. And the tide had come up nearly to the post office stoop.

“The tide always comes high this time of year,” Granny Lee said.

Dawna Ray watched Shadbush dump nothing but old well water onto the road to conjure up a storm.

“Let the storm winds howl!” he said, flailing his arms like he was fighting off a swirl of bees, and that night the winds were fierce enough to down two trash maples growing by the general store.

“Tut tut,” said Granny Lee, “I could have told you a storm was coming by the crick in my knee.”

But if nothing else Shadbush did was true, he was spot on when he’d said that sixteen years would fly by faster than bats in August. So it was that sixteen years later Captain Pete and Miss Lottie were in despair. For all their searching, there was still no sign of a magic kettle despite that mountain of rejects teetering in their back yard.

“I’m not worried,” said Dawna Ray, and she sent out invitations to everyone on the island, inviting them to her sixteenth birthday. Then she went into the kitchen and set Granny Lee’s big black kettle on the stovetop. She dumped in a pail of sour milk that she’d left sitting on the porch. She added a quart tin of lard. Last she piled in a peck of oysters, still in the shell. “That should do it,” she said, putting it all on a simmer, and she went upstairs to put on her party duds.

When the islanders gathered, Dawna Ray was radiant as ever, pretty as a picture in her gingham and curls. The islanders shook their heads in dismay that someone as pretty as all that would be dropping dead any minute now, and they watched her every move.

“Have some of my oyster stew,” she said, ladling up bowl after bowl from the kettle in the kitchen.

“Yes please, and thank you,” said the islanders as the bowls were passed around. And they clucked and smiled and smacked their lips and said it was the best oyster stew they’d tasted in a good long while, because that’s what they were taught to say when they’re served supper and who could forget their manners at a time like this. But truth be told, it was the most shameful batch of oyster stew ever to curdle a lemon cream, and when no one was looking, the islanders crept into the kitchen one after another and poured that chowder back into that kettle.

And that would have been that, but all of a sudden, who should come busting through the door but Shadbush, waving his invitation and spitting and spuming like a bird dog on a leash. The islanders shoved back against the parlor wall to make way as he thundered into the room.

“What’s the meaning of this?” he hissed. “Your time is up, young lady. When I snap my fingers you’re gonna drop down dead.”

The islanders shuddered and craned their necks to get a good view. Miss Lottie let out a stifled moan.

“I ain’t gonna do no such thing,” Dawna Ray flashed back. “Your magic can’t touch me.”

“Oh no?” Shadbush leered at her, then swung his head to face the islanders. “Oh no?” he repeated. “Who is it makes the tide come up? Who is it makes the storm winds blow?”

The islanders lifted tentative fingers and pointed at Shadbush.

“But I’m a reasonable man,” Shadbush went on. “We’re all neighbors. I wouldn’t want to cause any hard feelings. You don’t have to drop down dead—you can marry me instead.”

The islanders gasped. Miss Lottie let out yelp of relief. “Oh Dawna Ray,” she said, “what an opportunity for you!”

“Puff and nonsense,” said Dawna Ray. “I’m not gonna marry anyone. If you all believe Shadbush, then you’ll believe me when I tell you I have a conjure kettle more powerful than anything Shadbush has ever seen.”

“Prove it,” Shadbush hissed, waving his finger menacingly.

“Just look here,” said Dawna Ray. “I’ve been ladling oyster stew all night, and I’ve yet to make a dent in this kettle. It’s an everlasting kettle, I tell you. It’ll just keep making oyster stew till I tell it to stop. You can’t do that with anything in your conjure shack. I can outdo your magic any day of the week.”

Shadbush peered into the pot, full to the brim with oyster stew. He eyeballed all the dirty dishes piled high in the kitchen sink, and he rolled his head to face the islanders.

“It’s true,” they said, nodding to each other. “Good too,” they lied.

Shadbush dragged his long skinny finger through the warm stew and popped it into his mouth. “Bleah!” he spat. “Bleah! Bleah!”

“It’s poison to you, I’ll bet,” said Dawna Ray coyly.

Shadbush rubbed his mouth with his hands and bolted to the door. “That’s the worst stew I’ve ever tasted!” he gagged. He clutched at his stomach, pushed through the screen and hoisted himself blindly across the porch. “Bleah! Bleah!”

He was in such a hurry he stumbled down the porch stairs and fell smack into that pile of old kettles teetering there in the yard. Boink! Crash! Ouch! They all came tumbling down on top of him like dirty water down a drain. Smash! Crash! Clunk!

“Ow! Yow!” yelled Shadbush, and he hightailed it down the road, kettles rolling and tumbling after him like beagles on a rabbit.

And that, dear friends, was that. No one’s seen hide nor hair of Shadbush ever since, though rumor has it he’s been selling used cars somewhere near Salisbury.

And Dawna Ray? After that little stunt, the islanders were convinced that she was a natural born high man—high woman, in Dawna Ray’s case. They insisted on coming to her with all their aches and complaints. She finally went off to medical school so’s she would know best how to help them all. When she finished up her schooling she came home and set up a clinic there on the island where she doled out medicine and advice for many a year. And truth be told, now and again, she’d slip someone a bottle of whiskey and blackberry just to ease the rheumatiz. “Shadbush wasn’t all wrong,” she said.