



give  
her  
back  
to me

written by

jason  
garrett

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Give Her Back to Me

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one

present day

The Ripe Corn Moon sat low in the skies above Union County, and as she cleared the willow fields, Aubrey Clark believed she could reach up and touch it. Her grandma called the July moon by its Cherokee name, *Guyegwoni*. A full-blooded Cherokee from a long line of daughters, she called Aubrey her *inali* – or fox. Though Aubrey had the red mane of a fox, courtesy of an Irish father, she had the striking features of her mother’s Cherokee heritage.

At thirty-five, Aubrey still took it as a compliment when people spoke of how she reminded them of her late mom, June. She found the memories sweet, but she was used to being compared to someone else. Every now and again, someone would ask about Kaiya, who was her identical twin. Kaiya had left home sixteen years earlier and had not returned since. Her sister had been on her mind lately, especially now that it was just the two of them.

Preparations would begin next week for Union County’s annual Green Corn Festival, and that always made her want her sister near. The event was a precursor

for several autumnal festivals in their hometown of Anega and the surrounding counties. For Aubrey, it was her favorite time of year, and she wanted to share that with her loved ones. There were so few left; but she tried not to think about what she did not have.

She reached the fence line of a farm along the old state highway leading into town. The farm was owned by a family whose children had left home when she was a child, and the ground was as familiar to her as her own yard. Aubrey smiled as a soothing breeze drifted over the tall corn fields across the highway and cast her long tresses into a gentle wave. She could smell the oatmeal-based cold cream she used, and what her shampoo manufacturer decided was juniper. The scent of hay filled the air, and she spotted a speckled mare approaching at a gentle gallop.

A Welsh pony named Silver Lady greeted Aubrey and took a calm stance. She stroked the horse's neck and clucked her tongue to coo the beautiful creature. Silver Lady whinnied and pranced in anticipation. Her behavior made Aubrey smile as she leaned against the fence to admire her. She gently reached for the canvas backpack around her shoulder where she kept a gift for the mare.

“I’ll bet I know what you want. Have you been a good girl? Hmmm?”

Aubrey revealed a succulent Honeycrisp apple and was delighted as Silver Lady nuzzled her palm before chomping into the sweet fruit.

“Is that good? I’m gonna have to find another route one of these days, you know? I never get to eat my own apples because I save them for you two.”

Silver Lady snorted and struck the ground with her hoof, making Aubrey giggle. She rested her cheek against her forearms, as sweetly as a child lost in a dream. Silver Lady struck the ground once more and shook her head as her tail pranced.

“No? Okay, I’ll keep this route.”

While Silver Lady pranced and shimmered in the moonlight, Aubrey noticed the discolored gleam of light in the eyes of a tired dog on the farmhouse porch. The

fabric of her blouse scraped her warm skin and sent a shiver up her spine, teasing her fear of dogs. Had the dog more gumption, it might have kept her away from the horses. Instead, the dog plopped sideways and went back to resting.

Aubrey noticed the absence of Silver Lady's cohort, a cola-brown Quarter Horse named Sebastian. She whistled as best she could and walked along the fence a few yards, in hopes that the young stallion might spot her. She was dressed in an amethyst-dyed cotton pintuck blouse and a floral print skirt, which made her wonder how well she could be spotted at all. The moon gave her skin a silky glow, and she could only hope her eyes were more inviting than the dog's.

Ordinarily, Sebastian was the most reliable flirt in the county, never one to play hard to get. The showoff always put a smile on Aubrey's face, and his lack of attention dampened her mood. Just the same, she pulled the Honeycrisp she had brought him from her backpack and placed it atop the fencepost. She knew she would not have to scold Silver Lady from eating the second apple. They were both used to Sebastian's antics.

"We can't have him thinkin' we're the type to wait by the fencepost," she said with a wink of her blue eye. "Can we? You enjoy your night, pretty girl."

She gave the Welsh pony a pat, and cast another curious glance across the empty field before continuing her walk. The smell of a rusted mailbox filled the air as she crossed the gravel driveway, hurrying so she would not be noticed by the dog. A wave of cornstalks with moonlit tassels attracted fireflies and gnats but swayed collectively to guide her toward her destination. In the approaching distance, she could make out the landmarks and billboards welcoming travelers to Anega: "*A place where the world doesn't turn quite so fast,*" according to a hand-painted sign.



Anega, population thirty-seven hundred, was established by Thaddeus Brewer near the end of the First World War. His wife, Aggie, loved the glee the native children showed while singing and dancing, covered in mud up to their smiling faces. “Anega” was the word on their lips, spoken over and over as the Brewers arrived with all that they owned in tow. Brewer named the settlement after that word, to please his wife. Once families and businesses settled, he learned from a native that *anega* was the Cherokee word for “go.”

Aubrey had lived her entire life in Anega. She went to school there and enjoyed success as an athlete during high school. Back then, she had lettered three years in soccer, and won state events in long-distance jumping and high hurdling. She had held a state record in the latter event until seven years ago. Those feats seemed like they belonged to someone else, and nowadays she wondered how many pain relievers would be needed to compete against her younger self.

As she crossed the railroad tracks that established the beginning of town, she noticed the cracked lens on one of the signal lights. She had been a witness on the night that Billy Woods threw a beer can and struck the light. He was a classmate and baseball player determined to impress the Clark twins. It was not Billy, but Josie Dudnik, who impressed everyone when she decked him for making an unwanted pass at her at a party that same night.

Josie was Aubrey’s closest friend, and someone who pushed her to be more than her sister’s twin. Her precocious beauty had often smoothed the way for her to speak her mind, seldom with any repercussion. Billy’s dad was the high school principal, however, and it took only a few days before Josie was suspended from school on a lesser offense. That was how justice was dispensed in Anega; the good suffered, the bad got away with it. People complained about small-town life, but Aubrey imagined it was no different anywhere else.

Somberness took over her mind as she followed the sidewalk alongside the post office and a tax office owned by an accountant who copied off of her in school.

She kept her head down and shied away from the glow of signs on a gas station across the street. The tow truck parked under the sign absorbed most of the light and was in desperate need of washing and a coat of wax. Aubrey glanced toward the station's plate glass windows but found the attendant was as absent as Sebastian had been.

She made a diagonal path across an asphalt lot to stay away from the distasteful floral arrangements in large pots that were meant to beautify Main Street. The soil was overtaken by weeds and the flowers were mismatched, making her fail to see any beauty in them at all. She cut between a lopsided bench and metal boxes dispensing newspapers, and then realized she had come to a standstill. Across the intersection, catty-corner to her destination, the Union County Sheriff's Department evoked an abysmal glow of light.

It empowered her to turn her back on the building and she crossed the street with a confident, determined stride. There was no reason for her to verify her location or to look up at the Prussian-blue awning trimmed in white that covered the doorway. Nor did she have to look at a brass nameplate secured to the building's brick face. She could smell the potted ferns near the entry door, pots painted to match the awning, and stepped into the shadowy recess.

She could hear how the breeze rustled the patriotic banners, still on display from the previous weekend's Fourth of July celebrations. The sound masked her own heartbeat, and she stood listening to it until she was ready to make her next move. She craned her neck to knead the tension, and rubbed the sweat from her hand into the shoulder strap of her backpack. On a deep breath, she unzipped the mouth of the canvas bag and removed another gift.

No apple this time; the gift was far more special. She had scoured the Internet for two weeks before following an online ad to an auction site where she had found the perfect item. Now, wrapped in gold foil and white ribbon, she held it for the last time. She knelt cautiously in her skirt, steadied herself with her right hand, and



placed the gift at the foot of the door. She stepped back from the package and gave a bold nod, having taken the first step toward solving a mystery that was sixteen years in the making.

She pivoted, breathed steadily, and did her best to understand what walking at a normal pace entailed. It would all fall apart if she were spotted, she thought, and she wiped her palms against the fabric of her dress. At the next intersection, she made a sharp right-hand turn and stopped counting her paces. She looked ahead, past the rustling elms and oaks, to see a venue she had no choice but to pass. She could have taken an alternate route, but she had mapped out the most efficient path and wanted to stick to it.

Vehicles lined both sides of the street, reflecting the light of the building in their paint jobs. Aubrey saw men who saved their neckties for Sundays leading women dressed for mourning inside, but she herself went unnoticed. She imagined the women were too busy whispering out the sides of their mouths and the men were too busy noticing how the women were not sad enough to still be alluring. She also imagined the conversations would really get to buzzing were she to step into the light.

Merriman & Sons Funeral Home looked as welcome as could be expected from a parlor erected during the height of the Korean War. The gray vinyl siding and black handrails jutted from the green yard like a headstone. Its roof pressed against the branches of a line of elm trees on the west side, giving the entire building a slanted look. Battleship-gray paint coated the sloping concrete entryway, fitted with artificial turf that held water from the yard sprinklers like a sponge and sopped Aubrey's sandaled feet as she passed.

The leather became slippery against her dusty heel and she stepped out of her footwear to walk barefoot, which she preferred. She had no idea who was being laid to rest, but thought it wiser to distance herself than to find out. As far as most of

Anega was concerned, Aubrey and death were synonymous. Aubrey was not solely accused; rather, tragedy was associated with nearly all of the Clark family.

The great tragedy of Aubrey's life had been heard as far north as Shelby County and as far south as Lincoln County, encompassing one-fifth of the state where she could be revered with infamy. Aubrey had come to believe that the town resented her on a deeply personal level. Their resentment was not steeped in her suffering, but for her surviving. She was the daughter of a true survivor, her dad, who had been laid to rest on the day of the summer solstice.

Don Clark had clung to life for sixteen years, refusing to fall victim to injuries he sustained in the same tragedy that turned Aubrey into a celebrity befitting any horror story. The former sheriff of Union County, Don had the final say over what had happened to him in the line of duty. In the end, it was heart disease that took his life. He died a broken and disgraced local hero; but a local hero just the same.

Since the final spring of the last century, Don had remained bedridden and catatonic; the result of a broken back and extensive head trauma. He had taken a terrible fall at Amaskagahi Cavern, named for the water spirits, near Crescent Springs Quarry west of town. He had spent the last sixteen years unable to care for himself and suffered from dysarthria, a condition that rendered him mute. Aubrey had cared for her dad, never asking for help; which was seldom offered to her after the first two years anyway.

She believed the town sighed a collective breath on the day he died, though she had not yet shared in their relief. When she was a little girl, and even into her teens, her dad had been her hero—a larger-than-life man. The fact that the county shared her regard made him even greater in her eyes. After the accident, he became a symbol of Anega's wounded pride. Like most small towns, though, pride was not in short supply, and their judgment became an affliction.

She often wondered if Kaiya and their mom were wrong, having left Anega and their family behind. June Clark wanted to live, to have a life of fun times and no

regrets; neither of which were easy to find with a spouse in constant need. Even after her abandonment, Aubrey had forgiven her. When June died some years later, it was Aubrey who insisted she be buried in the family plot beside her grandma. Kaiya did not return for the funerals of either parent, but sent money in her place.

Aubrey's twin had left Anega in pursuit of her dreams, and worked now as a celebrity magician and illusionist. Aubrey stitched costumes, worked on props and co-designed the majority of Kaiya's most lauded tricks. Kaiya paid her generously, if not for her abilities, then because of her own guilt over leaving and never returning. Her mirror twin, as they called themselves, had never stopped trying to convince Aubrey to join her.

Aubrey had simpler tastes than Kaiya, and rarely spent the money lavished upon her on herself. Instead, she had put the money to other uses, like investing in a small flower shop with Josie. The path she was on had been the same route she had walked for nine years, and one she had not taken since January. In those days, she could name every person who lived on the twentieth block of 4th Street. Her old high school sat at the end of the street, a place where she had set state records and won talent contests participating in magic acts with her sister.

Now she wondered if they would consider her a friendly face, or wish that she had followed in her mom and sister's footsteps. Aubrey sighed as she tucked away those realizations and stared hopelessly at a small brick building with two large picture windows draped in ivory lattices. The bulbs of refrigeration units backlit the décor. She wondered what might happen if she walked through the front door again.

She did not want to deal with Josie or the local law, and instead slipped a square envelope through the mail slot on the door. Inside the envelope was a gift card to a picturesque little winery in Shelby County. It was a place that the shop's sole owner talked about wanting to visit for years, though her husband always found a reason not to take her there. Aubrey had never visited, either, but had spoken to the winery owner, who was courteous enough to mail her the gift card and even thanked

her with a complimentary bottle of wine. There was some irony in receiving the gift, as everyone in Anega knew that their postmaster was a lush.

Having delivered her fourth gift of the night, she stood and backed away from the doorway of Josie's Flowers & Gifts. The name change still hurt her heart. She much preferred the shop's original moniker of Aubrey & Josie's. The whole of Anega knew what they did, and there was no need for "Flowers & Gifts." Josie handled the customers, and Aubrey handled the flowers. When it came to that arrangement, the townspeople were able to shrug away Aubrey's past.

She turned into the alley behind the shop and stepped into a place that felt more like a recurring dream than the backyard of a two-story brick building. She passed under a vinyl trellis, unable to rely on her will. She and Josie had been smitten over the trellis when they had found it at a garden supply store in the city, and she dragged her fingertips across its soft edges. A smile lit her face as her feet rested upon smooth stepping stones that she had personally laid, and she breathed in the fragrant air.

Even with the help of a night light, it was difficult to see the flourish of the gardens where she had often worked. Divided off into four rectangular quadrants by stepping stones, the gardens were as much a display of Aubrey's talents as any of her commissioned arrangements had been. She could hear the running water in the fountain, something that Josie rarely remembered to unplug at night, and stepped toward the center of the courtyard. There sat a handmade wooden table with matching benches, where she liked to eat lunch, and had made business decisions with clients.

She spotted a line of black-eyed Susans along the back wall of the building, and smelled a nearby spearmint plant. In daylight, the shade of the surrounding elms made it all seem so perfect, so gentle, and she wished she would be able to spend her days there again. About the time that she was to say as much, she remembered that

she was all alone. If she stayed another moment, she feared the Widow Schultz across the street would spot her, if she hadn't already.

After three decades of curfews and responsibilities because of her dad's ill health, she thought freedom might have been more enjoyable. Instead, she felt fear. It was the kind that blossomed in the night, when the eye could not see as far, but the ear could hear twice as much. When the breeze overpowered the garden with scents of tar from the road and propane from a nearby tank, she wished her sense of smell had not been so keen. She had another eight blocks between the shop and her next destination. She kept walking on bare feet, prompting a stray to follow after her.

# give her back to me



The End

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## about the author

**JASON GARRETT** is the author of seven novels. His novel *Pursuit* was named a finalist in two categories at the 2012 National Indie Excellence Awards. His novel *Troubled Souls* was awarded winner of both the 2013 National Indie Excellence Award for Horror and the 2013 Beverly Hills Book Award for Horror.



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