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A Coup of Owls
Winter 2023



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Foreword

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A Conspiracy of Trees by Em Harriett

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You awaken in an unknown forest, searching for a way out...

Em (she/they) is a speculative fiction writer from New England. Their work is inspired by nature and the magic of the world around them. Em's work has appeared in *A Coup of Owls*, *All Worlds Wayfarer*, and several *Cloaked Press* anthologies, among others. Find Em on Instagram [@emharriettwrites](https://www.instagram.com/emharriettwrites) or at emharriett.com.

To Err and Fall, To Lose It All by Justyna Kulisa

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In a fit of frustration, a woman goes out on a drive in the mountains in a blizzard, unaware what forgotten and dangerous beings roam.

Justyna Kulisa is a writer of speculative fiction that's usually queer, often veers into the cosmic horror, and tackles the personal stakes rather than the world at large. Her fiction has appeared in the first Polish queer fantasy anthology and in *OFIC Magazine*. She writes too many stories at the same time and despairs greatly that their endings slip ever further out of reach. You can find more about her works at justynakulisa.com and [justynakulisa.tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com/justynakulisa)

Ethical Considerations of Starburst Weaving after the Bower Incident (a Retrospective) by Cormack Baldwin

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Starburst weaving is an intricate historical art form, but has its newfound popularity destroyed it?

Cormack Baldwin is an author, editor, and weaver, and the fact that his loom is made out of cardboard hasn't stopped him yet. His unwillingness to weave anything except straight lines, however, has. He is the head archivist (editor-in-chief) of *Archive of the Odd*, a speculative found fiction magazine. You can find a list of his works at cmbaldwin.carrd.co, or the man himself [@cormackbaldwin](https://www.instagram.com/cormackbaldwin) wherever Cormack Baldwins can be found.

Tuning by Zary Fekete

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A mother discovers an object which magically fixes things, and she wonders if it would work on her teenage daughter.

Zary Fekete grew up in Hungary. He has a novelette (In the Beginning) out from *ELJ Publications* and a debut novella being published in early 2024 with *DarkWinter Lit Press*. He enjoys books, podcasts, and many many many films.
Twitter and Instagram: [@ZaryFekete](#)

A Queen Fetched From the Night by Vijayalaxmi Samal

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A king lures a primordial creature from the night to marry with a promise that she demands to keep.

Vijayalaxmi Samal is a researcher living in Delhi where she collects books, runs *Dungeons and Dragons* campaigns and writes about things that feel real but are not. You can find her at [@kaunvijaya](#) on Twitter

Sancta Modwen by Christine Wolfram

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In an abbey perched along the sea, a nun begins to yearn to disappear beneath the waves as she grapples with an unusual pregnancy.

Christine Wolfram is a queer writer of weird and macabre fiction. When she's not dreaming up new stories, you can catch her at her local Renaissance faire, playing *Bloodborne*, or geeking out on her Youtube channel: [whimsydearest](#).

Foreword

The stories in this issue have an undercurrent of fear, featuring unequal power dynamics, manipulation, being lost... all things we are more than familiar with in the forest. But we want you to know that here, you are safe to be whoever you need or want to be. Unlike so much of the world, this is a safe place for anyone outside 'the norm' just trying to exist in these uncertain times. We embrace you all.

Is it me, or do our leaders attack with ease these days? *Such ease*. It makes my heart hurt. Yet, as much as that scares me, what terrifies me even more is the rational-sounding voice. The one that, at first, sounds 'reasonable.' The other day, I was listening to a woman in a TikTok talking about gender. At first, I went along with what she was saying. Her tone of voice was gentle, her words intelligently chosen, her argument logical. It was only after a minute I realised what she was *actually* saying. She made her fear-fuelled, hate-laced opinion seem rational. It wasn't. It was ill-informed, scare-mongering and dangerous. Worse, I'd given her my attention. That's what scares me. The loud, shouting, angry voice of hate is easy to recognise. The voice of a political party that you know actively hates you, that's easy to spot. It's not nice, it scares us, but we know what it is when we see or hear it. But that reasonable-sounding voice, the one that is gentle, kind and logical? That's the one you need to watch out for. Hate hides behind these voices. It slithers out slowly, smothering, warm and comforting. How do we protect ourselves? How do we fight it?

We listen. Always listen to the words. Ignore the tone, the pretty face, the gentle way. Listen and think. Make up your own mind. Read. Research. Listen. This forest is a perfect place to start. It's why I adore all our writers and artists – because what they have to say is important. It's not from a place of hate; it's from a place of *experience*. It's from life. It's from the world they actively live in. These are the voices to take in. These are the stories to help you navigate a path to your *own* opinion. Your *own* thoughts. To have the discussion. To ask the questions. I love talking and listening to people who are different from me. I love our team because they all have such experience to draw on. I want to listen. We don't all fit into the same box; we don't all fit into *one* box. We all change and evolve, and that's ok. That's what makes life and people so fascinating.

I received a wonderful message out of the blue from one of my closest friends the other day. I have known this person since I was at school (a very long time ago!). They had been thinking about how they felt after spending time with friends. With some, after they see

them, they feel a little – or a lot – drained, depleted, less than. But they said that when they see me, they feel fantastic (their word, not mine!) afterwards. I told them I feel exactly the same way. When I spend time with them, I feel seen, I feel loved, I feel safe. That’s what true friends do. Make you feel safe to be whoever you want to be at any point in your life. They stay with you through all the changes because they know what lies at the heart of you. The ‘me’ they befriended all those moons ago is very different to the person I am today, but they stayed with me, and I stayed with them because we know that we love each other. We know we support and care about each other.

What I want to say in this issue is: listen to each other, take care of each other and know that there are still safe places for you. Whoever you are, even if you haven’t quite figured that out yet, even if you thought you had but then discovered something else that fits better. Because the answer to who we are is always changing – and it should, as we grow, as we evolve. Becoming who we are is meant to take a lifetime. So, hold close those who lift you up on this journey and don’t be afraid to leave behind those who don’t serve you. Remember that a walk in this forest is always safe, nourishing and here to lift you right up to the tree tops where the owls hoot and swoop. We’ve got you.

Rhiannon Wood, Editor in Chief

A Conspiracy of Trees

by Em Harriett

Content Warnings: Mild otherworldly horror elements (body transformation).

Not your thing? Skip to page 8 for the next story.

You don't remember waking up here.

The trees tower over you like arbiters passing judgment, their broad leaves blocking out the sun, their trunks grotesque and beautiful as they twine ever-upward towards the canopy. Layers of fallen leaves coat the ground in mottled patches surrounded by moss.

You don't know why you're here. You barely remember your own name.

But you know you are not safe.

There is wisdom in the woods, say the old folk tales. One must simply walk through the forest to find peace.

The old folk tales say nothing about *these* woods.

You shiver in the damp air. You wear clothes familiar to you, but there is a fog in your head that does not clear in the understorey breeze. This frightens you. You take a deep breath and then pick a direction – any direction – to walk.

As long as your feet move, you walk.

*

Time forfeits meaning. Aside from basic bodily functions, you lose track of the hours spent wandering the woods. You're half-convinced your circadian rhythm is playing tricks on you.

Hunger gnaws at your stomach lining. Thirst coats your throat.

But you eat no branch-given berries; you drink from no leaf-ladled dew. A thorn in the back of your mind warns you that this forest may claim your soul if you relent and partake of it. Stubbornly, you continue, your feet sore and your body begging respite.

You ignore it. Your feet, however pained, still move.

So you walk.

*

There is another presence in these woods.

You can put no name to it, ascribe it no features other than it *watches*; the hairs on the back of your neck stand on end when you sense it nearby. The shadows that coat the forest beyond your immediate range of sight betray no beasts. Birds do not flutter or roost in branches. And yet you are *certain* something follows your progress through the endless woods.

You know something hunts you.

The trees' boughs whisper. You swear you hear words among the susurrations, a conspiracy, a plot to destroy your sanity and sense of self. You stop frequently to plug your ears and remind yourself that you are human, that they are only trees, and they cannot harm you – yet your spine crawls when you remember that trees are living things. Of *course* the trees are alive.

You hear them *breathing*.

Your feet move. You walk. You do not want to hear what the trees have to say.

*

If you do not leave, you will die here.

*

Part of you thinks you are already dead.

*

You stumble in delirium. Everything is green. You cannot remember the kiss of pure sunlight or the touch of human flesh, for every sight around you is filtered through layers of leaves and feels only humid and fresh. Your hand brushes a wet leaf; out of instinct, you wipe off the dew on your mouth and lick your lips.

Your mistake grabs you by the ankles.

The roots take hold first. You try to yank free, but your toes are no longer toes; your shoes split along the seams with roots. The soil swallows your shins. Bark hardens your skin.

You do not remember the transformation's full extent because, at some point, you cease being *you* and become *us*. And we welcome you with widespread boughs. We have grown here since before humans walked the earth, and whenever one such creature wanders into our woods, we offer it shelter and a home. For is that not basic courtesy? Is that not what we owe each other on our wild, green planet?

Yes, of course it is.

You understand now. We mean no ill will. We only offer peace and contemplation, as the old folk tales go. The forest is our community.

And we welcome you any time.

To Err and Fall, To Lose It All

by Justyna Kulisa

Content Warnings: Death, vehicular accident,.

Not your thing? Skip to page 14 for the next story.

Here's Anka: a wife of one and a mother of none. And tonight, she dies.

She doesn't know it yet. There are many things she doesn't know. Like the calm that comes with satisfaction and fulfilment in life. Like the joy of today, of things small and insignificant yet painted tremendous by the rays of the setting sun. Like the unknowns of her land. What is lost can't be found, only encountered anew, so she knows nothing of what hides in forests, lurks in rivers, and dwells in corners of infinitesimal spaces between houses and the ground they stand on. A flicker of white out in a field at noon in summer, she'd consider nothing but a play of light, not a hand outstretched, lips ready to spill a lure sweeter than honey, a demise waiting to happen. She'd never think twice before leaning over a stream overgrown with reeds, none the wiser that the tinkling laughter doesn't come from birds and that the long strands swirling in the water aren't plants. She doesn't know what she hasn't learnt and what prior generations were forced to forget, only to weave fairy tales out of cautionary horrors.

And she doesn't see danger when her own thoughts have teeth.

'You're overreacting,' said her husband when she pointed out he'd left a mess in the kitchen she just cleaned. 'Are you *sure* it was me?' he asked in response to her question of why the bathroom mirror was sprinkled with toothpaste. 'Don't be ridiculous,' he said when she asked him to stop whistling all the time because it got on her nerves, and he knew it, yet he kept on wheeze-whistling through his teeth all the bloody time, and she wanted to wrap her hands around his throat and squeeze, or just run out of the house and never come back, or—

Well, there they are. The teeth of her thoughts, the thorns of her self. They're dripping venom of the past that made her, of all the women in her life who told her to bear it and move on; dear, that's how life is, what else do you expect of it?

Earlier today, her husband said, 'Go for a walk, it'll do you good to clear your head,'

and Anka, hands shaking and heart overflowing with a blistering urge to scream, took the car keys to the car too big for her taste ('It's better to buy a family car in advance than worry about getting it when it's too late, don't you think?' her mother-in-law once said with a smile and conviction that brooked no argument, and Anka, eager to please in those early years, only nodded). And here she is, on a late-night drive through the Giant Mountains. Snow is falling in droves. Huge, white chunks are dancing in her car's headlights, which do nothing to light the road ahead farther than a metre or two. Only a fool would be out in the mountains on a night such as this. Among other things, Anka is, too, a fool.

Which is why, when she notices someone standing on the road, it's already too late to hit the brakes. She yanks the steering wheel to the right instead. Tumbling over the edge of the road, the car crashes into a tree, spewing steam from the engine as its hum dies into silence, the click-click of hot pipes and steel cooling in the frigid air. The seat belt digs into her flesh. It keeps her in place, but for one precious moment, she feels like she's floating, having relinquished control she's been holding on to for years.

It stops too soon. Blinking, Anka sits in the driver's seat as if nothing happened, hands still wrapped tightly around the steering wheel. There's not one part of her that wants to get out. Out there lies the snow, and the cold, and the life she'd rather burn than return to.

The door's yanked open. Anka looks to the side and meets the eyes of a woman in white.

Anka can hardly make her out against the snow. White skin, white dress, black hair, black eyes. Her youthful face shows openly what Anka hides within. She shouldn't be here, in the middle of the road in the dead of night. Not in this weather, not in those clothes.

'Are you all right?' the woman asks.

Anka uncurls her fingers from the steering wheel and says nothing.

'You should get out. It'll get cold soon.'

You should. What a curious way to start a sentence. Anka has heard it many times. Everyone always knew better what she should do, and not once did they think of asking her. It might have come late, the awareness of it, but once it did, it happened with enough rage to fuel a star. She's got it now, she has seized it, and the mere word is enough to make her bristle.

'I know what you want,' the woman whispers into her ear, into her mind, even though no sound carries in the world blanketed in snow. There's something fragile about this silence, something precious. Anka hears her own heartbeat in it; a thumping, quivering creature startled by the noises it's making, one she'd thought long dead.

‘And what do you think that is?’ she asks and looks at the woman again. Her dress is short-sleeved and deep-necked, in some places tattered. Her eyes are too dark, her teeth too many. A long-forgotten yearning rises in Anka, that of bygone years in which she failed to nurture it, choosing the easy path of looking away instead. Now that she’s got nothing left to lose, her eyes linger.

If she knew the dangers of taking a tantalising hand in forests’ depths, she’d have needed only a glimpse of the woman in white to run away screaming, futile as that would be. A prey can’t outrun a predator that has taken a liking to it.

‘To feel. Or rest,’ the woman says, her grin wide, her outstretched hand unwavering. ‘Wouldn’t you like that?’

Anka closes her eyes before that question.

‘Come,’ the woman says. Anka knows nothing about her, nothing of what lies at the end of the road after the forgotten has crawled out of its lair and set its eyes on a person. She’s not certain she knows much about herself, either.

Instincts blazing and promptly ignored, she takes the woman’s hand. It’s cold, but so is Anka’s. Even if it weren’t, she would have taken it because the winter night in the mountains is cold and dark, and she’s so terribly, wretchedly alone.

‘Where are we going?’ she asks as her legs sink calves-deep into the snow. She trudges through it more than walks, stumbling every other step as the woman drags her into the forest. She’s light on her feet, weightless, but her grip is an iron clasp around Anka’s hand.

‘Home.’

‘You don’t even know where it is.’

Neither does Anka. Four walls and a roof don’t make a home out of the house where nothing ever changes, where no warmth makes it through the threshold.

She should’ve left years ago. She didn’t. And so, she’s here now, on the side of a road that’s become the end of hers.

‘Home is where you want it to be. What you want it to be.’

Anka swallows the woman’s words like a hook. They sink deep into her, pull at her heart with all the sweetness of things forbidden. The pain shoots through her, leaving her lightheaded, afloat. The woman is her only anchor in the world that now holds only the snow, the cold, and the endless walking.

‘How much longer?’ Anka asks. The blizzard steals her voice, tears it to shreds.

‘Soon,’ the woman says as she leads her deeper and deeper into the woods. The

snowfall thickens. It blurs the trees and soaks Anka's clothes. Her heart, heavy in its emptiness, drags her down and wins the battle over her body against the pull on her hand. Anka falls to her knees, chest heaving and head spinning.

Her hand slips from the woman's and isn't taken back. The cold overcomes her: first her limbs, then her mind, then her empty heart where it settles with its kin she's kept there for years. And all she can think of, as the forest and the snow sing the song of olden days come again, is, at least someone held her hand.

When her last spark of life goes out, Anka's thoughts, full of teeth, come alive.

Ethical Considerations of Starburst Weaving after the Bower Incident (a Retrospective)

by Cormack Baldwin

Content Warnings: References to racism.

Not your thing? Skip to page 19 for the next story.

The term ‘starburst weaving’ is a neologism from the late 1940s, referring to ancient weaving styles from areas as disparate as the Pacific Northwest to Eastern sub-Saharan Africa. Most modern practitioners, however, rely on a style that combines traditions from Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and parts of North Africa. Despite varying methods, materials, and cultural legacies, all starburst weaving uses intricate knots and weaves to preserve wisdom within the garment it produces. The wearer thus gains the knowledge imbued.

All methods of starburst weaving are radial, where a series of wefts are brought together to form a central node, from which the weave expands out and connects to other nodes. Novice works often take the form of monkey-fist-like bobbles connected by colour-coordinated strands. Masters who have been weaving for decades, however, have been commissioned to weave holy wisdom into the silk robes of priests, each minuscule knot as even to the weave as stars are to the sky. To produce a garment of such quality requires hundreds, if not thousands, of hours’ weaving co-current with gaining knowledge to anchor it in the fabric. As such, in all studied societies, starburst weavers have been an elite class of artisans, serving only the wealthiest or highest regarded in their communities for most of history.

The rise of capitalism and the development of a larger middle class resulted in greater demand for starburst weaving. Lawyers commissioned ties fortified with constitutions. Doctors asked for the most recent theories of anatomy and pathology to be sewn into the cuffs of their coats. Many weavers (almost all women at the time) refused the exploitation of their craft, seeing it as a patriarchal and colonial commodification of wisdom they had spent much of their life accruing. Weavers took decades to train a single apprentice, keeping a continuous but limited line of intergenerational knowledge.

Those who partook in the market, however, took on more apprentices, who in turn took on assistants. The industry boomed, and as more practitioners sought work, prices dropped until even the lower-middle classes could afford occasional scarves, hats, or socks that would give them an advantage in their education or lines of work. Many attempts have been made to industrialise starburst weaving through failed inventions such as the spiralling jenny (1834) and radial mule (1873). These inventors and factory bosses would attempt to run lectures simultaneously to pressing workers to weave at speeds comparable to other linen factories to embed the educational content in the fabric.

Anyone familiar with the form of weaving will recognize the glaring errors in this approach. First (as many small-time practitioners attempting to sell cheating aids can attest), it is not enough to be proximate to the information. The practitioner must understand the material, and once that understanding is reached, it cannot be rehashed to produce comparable works. Group analyses of known material are often used to produce garments imbued with known information as well as the deeper understanding that results, but these are not possible when the weaver is pushed even to a moderate clip.

To avoid split attention, the weaver cannot focus on the weaving. While some meta-weaves pass on knowledge of unique knots or patterns, this information retrieval must be seamless while in use to avoid weaving it into their own product. On their own, it can take years of practice before the weaver is comfortable enough to enter what practitioners refer to as ‘the trance.’ Even then, most early practical attempts are small garments made of thick yarns to capture the moment. The weaver must remain in this flow state, both weaving and not recognizing that they are weaving, doing without dwelling. Traditionally, full-sized garments were not produced until nearly a decade into the practice. As such, starburst weaving necessarily remained a cottage industry for most of human history.

Which brings us to the Bower incident.

It was long assumed that the almost disembodied flow state was indescribable and unknowable. Attempts to harness it, none of which have been recorded, would likely have been seen as foolhardy. This may have been our mistake.

Jamie Bower was born in 1920s Tennessee to ex-sharecroppers. Little else is known about their early life or education. What is known is that Bower eventually learned various textile trades, both industrial and artisan. By the time they arrived at the New England Turkish Weaving Guild (an anachronistic name for starburst weaving) annual meeting in 1943, they had mastered enough fibre crafts to bring a sizeable portfolio in order to appeal for entry.

They were soundly denied. Theories abound for why this may be. The Starburst Weaver's Society (the name now used for the NETWG) maintains that this was because they did not have an affidavit from a confirmed member, which was at that time required for new weavers seeking mentors to apprentice under. However, the Guild was also strictly segregationist. Moreover, Bower's declarations that they were 'neither man nor woman nor something in-between' would have no doubt caused a stir in the conservative, all-female Guild. Some speculate that they described their plans in their application and thus were denied to 'save' the art form.

The latter theory is unlikely. It was not until after returning to their Delaware home, defeated, that they sent a letter to their friend (and, some speculate, lover) Elizabeth Prusinski, asking, 'But why should we keep this knowledge behind walls? They argue preservation, but they use it to segregate, deny, and close off. Is a garden behind iron gates preserved?'

Letters to Prusinski soon stopped, as Bower moved to live with her during a bout of ill health on the part of Prusinski. Bower had few other contacts they frequently communicated with regarding weaving. In the following three years, only snippets suggest what was going on in Bower's workshop. 'I apologize for the lateness of this letter,' they wrote to a friend in 1946, 'but I have been singularly focused on a project of mine I believe may finally be coming to completion.' To a cousin later that year, they wrote, 'I have finished something I am immensely proud of, though I fear explaining the details could bore one to tears.'

When the Starburst Shawl was first displayed in 1947, any tears shed were certainly not of boredom. The rounded shawl combines Bower's signature reds and blues, with each node highlighted in white. A fractal of knots and weaves keeps the viewer turning the fabric over and over in their mind until they find themselves long removed from it and still trying to find an end in their imagined memories. Each viewer seems to come away with their own vision of it, unique to what they hope to see.

The beauty of the piece cannot be understated, but it was not what lent the name to the entire form of weaving. It was what had been woven into each strand of fine yet sturdy wool. The silks and cottons preferred by many artisans were too slippery to hold the secrets of entering the trance-like state that granted weavers the ability to store knowledge in their works. Flyaway threads connected disparate strands to form a net so strong that those who wear the shawl today can still use its lessons.

If it only passed on the trance, perhaps the incident could have ended as a curiosity held by the most elite weavers. But coded into the warps and wefts was an additional secret –

a copy of the exact information used to create it. Those wearing the shawl could create another, the wearer of whom could create yet another, and so on.

Hobbyists who had never expected to become full practitioners begged Bower for replicates. Instead, they lent out the shawl, instructing the user to copy it. Most made multiple. Those gifted them made more. People who had never even considered fibrecraft borrowed friend's shawls and found themselves enthralled. They made their own and passed on others. Photocopied zines shared information on where to get a Starburst and suggestions of what to make once the reader had it. And at each level, there were improvements. Changes in the knots, changes in the structure. Tiny conveniences that allowed the pattern to move from full-sized shawl to shoulder wrap to scarf.

An open-source, infinite weave. A death knell for secrets and cloistered artisans.

Which brings us to today's starburst weaving landscape. The vast majority of weavers have never heard of Bower, but online communities flourish with the same egalitarian, DIY spirit they championed. Anyone with an internet connection, a nearby yarn shop, and either a credit card or a generous friend who started before them can get a Starburst cowl (or scarf, or sweater, or mitts) and begin making garments once regarded as the highest magic.

And so the question has moved yet again. *What, how* and *why* are long settled. *Who* is not a concern for most, though it should be noted that Starbursts are not accessible everywhere, and some practitioners forgo them to maintain local or family traditions. What remains is a far more nebulous *is*.

Is an infinite-growth practice sustainable? The use of Starbursts, either in training or throughout careers, means there are far more practitioners than there are buyers. Indeed, most buyers are also weavers. While some who sell their work make enough to live off of it, most will never make enough to cover the fibre bought for each product, not to even consider the hours of work that go into it. What results is a mad scramble for market space that has long been filled. Desire to get any share in this space results in practitioners from diverse backgrounds watering down their work to meet imagined market expectations. Ancestral weaving styles wither even as indigenous patterns and materials are appropriated.

And then the greatest question, all-encompassing yet deceptively simple – is it moral?

Ignore cheating aids in the form of hidden crew socks. Ignore hate-spewing political speeches woven into cheerful hats. Ignore all of the immoral uses, as each is balanced by a mother weaving love into her newborn daughter's blankets or old languages sewn into new clothing. Perhaps society was able to ignore these worries when it could ignore or venerate its practitioners. Their worries were formless, immaterial, a gossamer thread among thick wool.

Martyrdom precludes ethics, and as the only practitioners of a holy art, their work was assumed to be a singular, necessary, moral good.

But now, with thousands, if not millions, of weavers, we are forced to see starburst weaving for what it is. In gifting, a cost of time and resources unmatched. In selling, a commodification of passion, of ancestral wisdom, of the very soul.

Yet this has always been true, and little care is given to the whims of pre-Bower weavers. Does it only matter because it impacts us, not a distant them? Have morals changed, or have we?

Tuning

by Zary Fekete

Content Warnings: Difficult parent/child relationship, transformation.

Not your thing? Skip to page 28 for the next story.

The act of taking a piano into one's home brings with it a certain responsibility. The instrument, left alone, will not stay in tune. It will require regular maintenance. If the piano owner does not keep the instrument in tune, the sounds played on the instrument will become degraded, leaving the listener disappointed and put off.

*

'I hate you! I wish you were dead!'

The words echoed off the living room walls and were punctuated by the slam of my daughter Claire's bedroom door. It happened every day. I couldn't keep the fights straight anymore. *I smothered her. She had no freedom. She wanted to move out.*

Was this what I had been like when I was young? Surely not. What had I been like? Claire seemed so forceful. So full of spirit when something spited her. I couldn't remember ever feeling that way. I was always content for other people to do things for me. When it was time to make a decision, it always seemed easier to go along with what my girlfriends wanted to do.

I stared at Claire's closed door for a moment, trying to remember what I had done wrong. I couldn't remember. I stood next to the piano and traced a finger across the key cover. I willed my mind to slow down. What had we been arguing about? Something about algebra. But it wasn't really about algebra. It never was.

I took a deep breath. Claire would come back out shortly. She always did, and then we would make up, only to start at it again later. The cycle was endless and exhausting.

*

Over time, the wooden elements of the piano will degrade, requiring the fresh application of glue. Depending on the degree of degradation, certain parts of the piano may need to be replaced. A certified piano tuner will be able to assist the owner in determining the state of the piano. It is best for the owner to resist fixing the piano themselves because this could result in the piano becoming more damaged.

*

I sat down on the piano bench, fingering through several loose sheets of music. I hadn't really played since high school. The piano was a gift from a friend who had moved last month and had come with several sheets of beginner music and a few simple pieces by Beethoven. I picked something randomly and started to play but immediately stopped. No. No, not right. I thumped the black key a few times. My friend had told me it would need tuning. I kept putting it off and dealing with the off-key D-flat. Come to think about it, that was very much like me, too. I'd never been one to fix things or take matters into my own hands; I usually waited for others to do the fixing. That was why the piano wasn't tuned. I hadn't the energy to make a call; I'd just put up with the out-of-tune D-flat. But today, my ears couldn't take it.

I stood from the piano and walked toward the kitchen when the doorbell rang. I opened the front door and saw a middle-aged man in a grey suit. He held a leather bag that looked well-used.

'Hello, madam,' he said. 'I understand you have a piano in need of a tune-up?'

I hesitated. How did...?

He produced a few tools from the bag to show me he was the real thing. Wordlessly, I stepped aside. He came into the entryway and took off his shoes. They were scuffed but well cared for otherwise.

'It's down here, I believe?' he said, indicating the hallway that led to the den.

'Yes,' I said. 'Did Mary call you?'

He smiled at me and turned to walk down the hall. 'No,' he said. 'I could hear you playing from the street. That D-flat key isn't quite right, is it?' He chuckled as he turned into the den.

When he saw the piano against the wall, he let out a sigh. He passed his hands over the dusty top like he was petting a cat. 'She's a nice one,' he said. 'How long have you had her?'

'Only about a month,' I said.

‘Did you have experience playing piano before she arrived?’

To my surprise, I felt glad he was here. ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘A bit. I mean, I played some when I was a young girl, but nothing much recently until... she arrived.’ I smiled to myself, enjoying the female pronoun he had given the old instrument.

He nodded. ‘May I?’ he said, indicating the bench.

‘Please.’

*

One of the key decisions a certified piano tuner will make is which tuning hammer to use. Hammers are made with a wide array of materials, and each hammer’s length, angles of head, and tip may differ. A low-quality hammer may only be formed from a single piece of material. Good hammers are as carefully crafted as the piano itself.

*

He sat down and began to trill his fingers up through the keys a few times. I noticed he purposefully didn’t strike the guilty D-flat key, almost as though he was saving it for greater attention.

‘Lovely,’ he said. ‘She has a lot of life in her yet. Now then...’ He straightened his back and struck the D-flat key a few times. With each thump, the note gonged off-key. ‘Has it always sounded like that?’

‘Yes,’ I said. I felt ashamed. ‘I have been meaning to get it checked out, but I wasn’t sure...’

‘...Wasn’t sure how to get ahold of me?’ He turned to me with a smile.

I smiled back. ‘Yes, I suppose.’

He stood up, opened his leather bag and took out a small, gold-coloured instrument. It was a tuning hammer. He stood up and opened the top of the piano. With a small grunt, he lowered his arm into the piano back. I could hear the faint tinging of strings as his hand moved around in the piano’s depths.

‘Strike that D-flat a few times, would you please?’ he said.

I moved forward and thumped the black key. As I did so, I could hear the note subtly change. It went from twanging off-kilter to a richer, more refined sound. As the note changed, the man’s face changed with it, his smile increasing in joy.

‘Ah, that should do it,’ he said and pulled his hand out of the piano. He closed the top and sat back down on the bench, putting the tuning fork down next to him. He cracked his knuckles quietly for a moment and placed his hands on the keys.

Then he played. The air in the room filled with a cascade of notes, tumbling across one another. The air seemed to shimmer around him from the rich, thick chords. Satisfied, he stood from the bench and snapped his case shut.

‘Well, no problems now,’ he said. ‘May I wash my hands in your bathroom?’

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘It’s just down the hall.’

He nodded, moving down the hall. I followed him. A moment later, I heard the water flowing from the tap. I marvelled at how quickly the whole thing had happened. I was strangely delighted. The problem was fixed, and I hadn’t needed to do anything. The water in the bathroom shut off, and he returned, straightening his suit.

‘Madam, I thank you,’ he said. He handed me a card. It was white with black lettering and said, *Mr Anderson. Tuning.* ‘If you have any more problems, just call me.’

‘What... what do I owe you?’ I said.

‘Oh, nothing.’ He turned to me with a smile. ‘I love any opportunity to improve something.’ Then he walked down the hall, opened the door and was gone.

*

The act of tuning the piano requires deft assessment on the part of the tuner. A wrong move will leave the piano in worse shape. Over-tuning, the act of twisting the hammer farther than the strings require, may result in damage to the inner workings of the instrument.

*

Slam! I heard Claire’s steps disappear outside as she ran for the school bus. My hands were lifted, mid-argument, where she had cut me off. This time, it was about the tattoo she got last week. I asked her where she got the money to pay for it. Her face flushed red; she called me a bitch. And now, as usual, she was gone.

I dropped my hands and went to the kitchen. The unwashed dishes in the sink stared up at me. Below the sink on the ground, there were several days’ worth of accumulated food stains. Looking at them made me feel guilty and tired. Cleaning was another thing I did

reluctantly and only when it couldn't be put off anymore. The stains on the floor told me this was one of those times.

I reached for the sponge. It was soggy and ragged. I bent for the lower drawer to get a new one. The drawer stuck as I pulled at it. I had to yank extra hard, and then it gave way with a jerk, and the face plate struck my knuckles. I winced and sucked at my hand as I took out a new sponge. Slowly, I soaped it and gave it a few limp passes across the plates.

I piled the plates in the drying rack, but I couldn't bring myself to tackle the silverware at the bottom of the sink. I stood in the kitchen for a moment, listening to the drip-drip of the water gurgling down the drain. I turned and wandered into the den. Maybe I would try the Schubert piece this time.

I stopped. The tuning hammer. It was still on the bench. Mr Anderson had forgotten it. Surely, he would be back once he realized it was gone. I reached down and picked it up. It had a heavy, balanced feel. The hammer felt strangely warm against my fingers.

I walked back into the kitchen and reached for the lower drawer. As I did, the tuning hammer bumped against the face plate. I braced myself this time, ready for the drawer to stick. To my surprise, it slid out effortlessly. I felt like I was touching melted butter. I slid the drawer in and out a few more times.

How long had the drawer been sticking? Several weeks, at least. And now, suddenly, it was smooth? I frowned as I looked at the drawer's face, then bent down to look underneath it. As I did, I put the tuning hammer on the ground. I didn't see anything under the drawer but smooth wood.

I closed the drawer and reached down for the tuning hammer. My mouth dropped open. The fork lay on the floor with a circle of clean tile around it. The food stains around it were gone. The circle was perfect, as though it had been drawn with a compass.

Slowly, I reached for the hammer. I touched it, half expecting it to shock me. It didn't, but it *did* feel warm. I picked it up and cradled it in my hand for a moment. I turned it over a few times and noticed a small engraving near the handle. *Mr Anderson. Tuning.* I looked at the drawer and then back down at the circle in the stains.

Feeling ridiculous, I lowered the hammer over another dirty section of the kitchen floor. Nothing happened. Then I touched the hammer to the ground. I gasped. The stains dissolved as though they were oil separating from water. I dropped the hammer in surprise. It skittered across the floor a few inches and came to rest on a new section where, once again, it was surrounded by a perfect circle of clean tile.

I stood up and backed away from the hammer. The kitchen was silent. Outside, I could hear birds in one of the trees twittering. I stared at the hammer. Then I reached into my pocket to take out the card. *Mr Anderson. Tuning.*

Carefully, I reached down and picked up the hammer. I looked around the kitchen. My eyes settled on the wall mirror. There was a small piece broken from the corner, a casualty of one of the arguments with my daughter from the last few days. I stepped across to the mirror. I looked at my reflection, surprised to see my mouth was still open. I closed my mouth, bent down and gently touched the hammer against the broken corner of the mirror. Noiselessly, the glass extended itself, as though it was liquid mercury, and filled in the broken corner.

My throat felt constricted. I stood up and closed my eyes. *Breathe*, I said to myself.

*

In theory, a longer lever on the hammer is better than a shorter one. This is because most tuning consists of making extremely minute adjustments in rotation to each tuning pin. For example, if a pin is meant to be turned by one degree, a 254 mm long lever will only be rotated 4.3 mm. Such small adjustments are far easier to control with a long lever.

*

Later that afternoon, I sat in the living room on the couch. On the coffee table were several objects I had collected from throughout the house. A broken doll, forgotten, from under my daughter's bed. A sweatshirt from a camping trip last summer with a stain on its arm. A coffee cup I had purposefully broken by dropping it onto the kitchen floor. They were all lined up on the table. I had touched each one with the hammer. They were flawless, with no cracks or stains. I stared at them. And I kept looking down at the tuning fork in my right hand, feeling its warmth pulsing against my fingers.

A loud crack shattered my thoughts. I jumped. I looked up. The living room window suddenly had a crack running from top to bottom. What happened? I stood and walked to the window. Then I looked out through the glass at the ground outside. There was a small sparrow fluttering on the ground. It had flown against the window and broken its wing. Wordlessly, I held the hammer against the window and watched the crack repair itself. Then I walked to the front door and went out to the back yard.

I stood over the sparrow. It was frightened. It kept craning its head around, trying to make its useless wing work. Slowly, I crouched down next to it and held out the hammer. The tiny bird shuddered and was still. It was looking at me with one terrified eye. Gently, I touched the fork against its wing.

With a small hop, the sparrow righted itself. It took a few practice flaps. It folded both wings against its body and looked at me for a moment. Then it flew up into the sky and was gone.

*

A tuning hammer's ability to adjust the internal pins of a piano is a double-edged sword. Proper adjustments will result in a sublime sound. Too much change to a pin, however, and one runs the risk of distorting a piano's sound even more, potentially risking ruining the internal components of the piano in the process of attempting to tune it.

*

It was late afternoon by the time I heard my daughter's step outside the front door. I sat in the living room on the piano bench. The hammer was in my hand. The door opened and closed, and then I saw her crossing the doorway toward her bedroom.

'Claire?' I said.

She stopped, cocked her head and looked at me as though she was ready for it to begin again. 'What?' she said.

'Would you come in here for a moment?'

She rolled her eyes. 'I've got homework. Can't it wait?'

'It will just be a second.'

She shrugged and came into the room, dropping her bag on the floor. She circled around to the couch and sat down, twirling her hair in her finger.

'What are these?' she said, jerking her head in the direction of the objects on the table.

'Nothing. I was just cleaning up a bit.'

She nodded and sat back against the couch. 'What do you want?'

I stood, holding the hammer. 'Claire, why do we keep fighting?'

She laughed and stood up. *'I don't have time for this!'* She crossed the room toward her bag. Her back was to me. I took a breath and stood, lifting the hammer. I stretched it toward her back and touched her.

A soft breath of air blew past my skin. I felt my hair move slightly. There was a smell of flowers. Claire stood, frozen, her hair wrapped in an amber shade of twilight.

Then she turned. Her eyes were half-open. She smiled. She was like I remembered her when she was a little girl. Slowly, her eyes opened wider. She looked at me with a gaze that was at once young and very old.

Tears welled in my eyes. Claire reached for my face. Her touch was warm.

'Mom,' she said. 'How...?' She looked around. 'How long have we been here?'

I swallowed. 'Don't you remember, honey?' I said. 'You just got home.'

Her eyes came back to mine. 'Of course,' she said. 'But all day, I was secretly with you here. I was just waiting to come home to you.'

She turned and walked to the door. She stopped to turn back a moment. 'Mom,' she said. 'Is it ok if I make us dinner tonight?'

I nodded. She smiled again.

Then, almost imperceptibly, her eyes changed. Her face grew anxious, as though she felt some internal twist in her mind. Her eyes fluttered and then stuck, somewhat askew. Then, her pupils grew limp. One eyelid began to twitch.

The last thing she said before she fell was, 'How horrid I feel.'

*

Only a seasoned piano player will know if their instrument is not working correctly. A key may stick. Internal mallets could double-strike or miss their mark entirely. A string may continue to sound long after a key has been released. Each tiny sensation will alert the owner to a problem. Diagnosing the need to tune a piano is known as 'assessing the temperament' of the instrument.

*

'I don't have time for this!' The air changed. The smell of flowers was gone. I was standing behind Claire again. Her back was turned. The hammer in my hand reached toward her.

The doorbell rang. Claire disappeared into her room. I stood, frozen, with the hammer still extending into the air. A moment later, the doorbell rang again. I went to the front door and opened it.

It was Mr Anderson. He smiled at me.

‘I’m terribly sorry to bother you, madam. I seem to have forgotten...’ His eyes landed on the hammer in my hand. ‘Yes, there it is,’ he said. ‘May I?’ He extended his hand.

Instinctively, my hand closed around the hammer for a moment. Then, I handed it to him. He took it, and the warmth of its presence in my palm suddenly faded. As he took it, his eyes registered a moment of surprise. He looked at me and then past me to the hallway behind me. A burst of loud music began playing from the direction of Claire’s room.

‘It feels like you’ve used it a few times,’ he said, nodding at the hammer in his hand.

‘I...’ I said. ‘I’m sorry.’

He nodded. ‘It happens. This can all be such a large and terrible world sometimes.’

My eyes welled with tears. He put the hammer in his bag and snapped it shut.

He gestured in the direction of the music. ‘I’m glad I came back when I did.’

He turned and walked to the sidewalk and then disappeared down the block. I stood in my doorway, looking out at the ragged world.

A Queen Fetched From the Night

by Vijayalaxmi Samal

Content Warnings: Implied abortion, murder.

Not your thing? Skip to page 32 for the next story.

I do not know of hunger until he brings it to me. He journeys for years to find my stream but does not pray. His hand reaches into the unending stream of night, and he demands a wife. He makes promises of a honeyed life and talks of lands in the north unconquered and in need of a stern hand. He is without a crown but has the will of a king. He talks of a bed in his home that could be warm and desires for a kingdom to rule and a legacy to share. He has enough dreams to whisper for years upon years until I yearn for it too.

I reach out with a cold, dark hand to seize something material for once.

‘Is all you say true?’ I ask.

‘There is nothing more I long for than to share it all with the one who brings me such joy.’ His words remind me of the first prayer when it was ever-shifting, unexplored and sweet on my tongue. I will be the bringer of joy. I will be a warm embrace. I will be the executioner of his will.

‘You will have the world,’ I tell him, and he accepts my hand, so I begin.

*

We are wild things. A court overwrought with vegetation, overgrown with shrubbery. Vinery creeps through the windows and breaks ancient glass. It holds the crumbling walls together and wraps around the bones of our house. There is grass under our feet carpeting the court, and at some point, some old god sends a thunderstorm to break the roof.

I hold my husband, my king, close and whisper to him all of the secrets I have uncovered. I have slithered through the nooks of old bars and the filth of pristine coin houses. I have waited at slaughterhouses and brothels for good men and memorised their faces to bring to him.

When we return to court, the roof is gone, and sunlight falls on his hair, kindling it aflame. It proves his divinity. His rule is written by a higher authority, and so, the ones he names to their death are also meant to die. This is the way of the world.

My king sits me by the foot of his throne, his little demon, his valiant queen, and reads his judgement. When men beg for his mercy, he lays his hand over my head and tells me to do as I please. Since I whispered the names to him, it is my hand that swings his sword, and then my king draws me by my bloodied hand to our bedroom. He wipes the splatter of grey matter from my palm and tells me he will give me a son and a purpose.

*

I dream of a world where I will be a mother. I will be a nurturing thing with an infant suckling from me. I think of the little demon born of me, taking everything from me. He will weaken my bones, and he will weaken my heart. He will lord over me when my husband is gone, and I will be his queen regent until he takes a wife. Maybe he will slay his father and rebuild the roof. Maybe he will resurrect the dead gods we put to soil. Maybe he will not. This is a risk I contemplate as I drip venom from my teeth into my tea. If anything kills him, it will be me.

So, I drink.

*

My king is unhappy with me. We have tried for a son twenty times, and he does not understand why we are cursed so. He stirs day and night with furrowed brows, walking our halls with a single thought burning behind his eyes.

‘My beloved, find out which god has kept me from having a son,’ he asks of me when he has not brought me a flower in days.

Nevertheless, I leave his chambers and walk the world. There are a million gods, one for each village and each road, all squabbling over pesky dominion and meagre offerings, demanding undying loyalty. I find one that lords over a village burgeoning with wheat. The villagers sleep with their stomachs full and wonder if they have found heaven already.

I bite the soil and drool poison over it until it seeps into the roots and shrivels their wheat. They turn to their god, but their lord has no answer. He brings forth rain that will not

wash the poison. He pulls in favours for scant rays of sunlight, but it doesn't feed the trees. When the cattle feed, they groan all night and vomit blackened chyme, crawling with bugs.

Once they are done with begging and started with anger, I drag the god out of his home by his hair. He looks less like a god now and more like a starving man and does not understand why I am here. His bones clank against the hard, cracking land and ring with questions that I have no reason to answer.

I throw him to my husband's feet and proclaim, 'He was jealous of you, my lord. He wanted your dominion. He prayed against your line.'

God no more, he shakes his head pitifully. My husband, my poor husband, does not see it. He looks at me and smiles. I have been absent for months, and he must have longed for me in my absence.

'Dispose of him and then come to my chambers, my dear,' he tells me. He does not stay for my work.

I take the god apart by flesh, by every wish. I undo every strand that joins him to another until he drains black ichor into the streets. The forgotten god asks, 'When will you be done?'

'Soon,' I tell him. I do not treasure this, but I am quick and efficient, and when I have taken him apart, I take his ring and tie it to my braid. With an added bauble, I reach my wedded bed and lie with my husband and hope he looks at me again.

'We shall have a son now,' he says with hope.

I stroke his beard and nod. 'We shall. We shall.'

And again, when the dusk comes, I take the tea from our handmaiden. I sit by his feet, his loving wife, his demon queen and drip venom from my teeth. I stir it twice and begin to sip. When I return to bed, I find my husband crying. His eyes swim with unending rage and a strange pain.

'You killed our son.' His voice shakes.

'I killed them all before they were anything but intention,' I tell him, for there is nothing to hide now. I am sure he will understand.

He shakes his head wildly in anguish. 'You disobeyed me.'

'I obeyed our dream.' I take his chin in my hands and still him. He starts to pull away, but I hold on. He has grown thick and lazy and slow in all the years of his reign.

'Come. Let's make another.' I sink my head to his neck and kiss where the tendon meets the flesh. He is still mortal. He is still warm.

'I loved you,' he says as if we are broken already and will not mend.

I open my mouth and answer with a tear into his flesh. I will not leave. I built this court with blood and souls. I made it flesh and whole. He shivers in my hands and rolls limp to my lap. I crest his head with my hand and let it crack against the floor. It releases blood, dark as the black of the night, and I stain my nails with it.

When I emerge from the night, I tell others of the war that has been declared on our kingdom. I wear a dress stained with his blood and ask them to fight for their widow queen. This kingdom is my child, and it will have the world.

Sancta Modwen

by Christine Wolfram

Content Warnings: Pregnancy, unnatural pregnancy.

Not your thing? Then you have come to the end...

Sister Modwen could hide the swelling of her stomach no longer. She drew the hushed whispers and reproachful gazes of the other nuns at the abbey. It was only a matter of time before the abbess confronted her on the matter.

She ran her thumb along her rosary and fervently prayed to Mary, Mother of Mercy, to grant her strength as she walked to the abbess's office.

Dread filled her as she stepped inside. The abbess sat behind her desk, her head bent over a pile of ledgers.

‘Revered Mother, you wished to see me?’ Modwen asked.

‘Sister Modwen, there you are.’ She laid down her quill and clasped her hands. ‘Do you have any idea why I summoned you here today?’

Modwen straightened, steeling herself. ‘I assume it’s because of my condition.’

‘Yes, your... condition.’ She briefly glanced down at Modwen’s belly. ‘I am accustomed to taking in pregnant women, but to have a sister who has sworn her oaths, promised herself as a bride to Christ, become pregnant is a shame upon this abbey.’

‘I have not broken my oaths, and I have remained faithful to Him!’

She rolled her eyes. ‘Spare me. It’s as plain as day. You are pregnant, and you are no Virgin Mary.’

‘I may not be the Virgin Mary, but I assure you, I am still a virgin.’

The abbess snorted. ‘The amount of times I’ve heard the women seeking refuge here claim Immaculate Conception, but from you? You should know better than to carry on this folly. Repent, confess, give us the name of the child’s father, and I shall show you mercy. Keep silent...’ She trailed off, shrugging. ‘Well then, the rest of your life here at the abbey will be miserable indeed, that I promise you.’

Modwen wavered, weighing her options. She could lie and claim some poor sod begot her with child, and they would suffer in her stead, but she would live with that shadowy guilt gnawing away for the rest of her life.

No, she couldn't bear that on her conscience.

She bowed her head. 'Forgive me, Reverend Mother, but I cannot repent for a sin I did not commit.'

'Impudence! We took you in as a child – you, the penniless daughter of a fisherman who couldn't even afford to pay this abbey a proper dowry. We clothed you, fed you out of charity, and this is how you repay us? With insolence? Very well, if you are going to be a stubborn mule, then you shall be treated as one. One month of kitchen duties for you. Perhaps the hard work will do you some good and loosen your tongue.'

*

The abbess made good on her promise. The next day, Modwen was tasked with less pleasant chores. She scrubbed pots and cleaned laundry amongst the laypersons until her hands turned to shrivelled raisins.

She was relieved when the bell rang for Vespers, marking the workday's end. She dried her hands, sang her hymns, and silently slunk back to her cell, hoping to avoid as many of the other nuns as possible.

She was reading her bible when she heard a familiar voice outside her door – Aghna's.

'Modwen, it's me. I didn't see you at dinner, so I've brought you some food.'

Aghna was her closest friend in the abbey. While the rest of the nuns either shunned her as a pariah or stared at her with pity, Aghna stood reassuringly by her side, and she welcomed her counsel right now.

'Come in,' said Modwen, setting her bible aside.

Aghna stepped inside, closing the door behind her, and walked over with a loaf of sea moss bread.

'I heard the abbess was harsh with you today,' she said, handing it to Modwen.

'Twittering birds must spread rumours fast,' Modwen muttered, taking the food from her. She hungrily tore into it, chewing and savouring the briny tang of the sea moss on her tongue.

As she ate, she glanced up to see Aghna was watching her with a furrowed brow.

‘You didn’t actually...’ Aghna began.

‘I have lain with no man. I don’t know how it happened or why, but no one seems to believe me.’ Modwen’s voice cracked. She could contain her composure no longer. Her emotions came unravelled like a ball of yarn, and her shoulders began to wrack with sobs.

Aghna rushed toward her, drawing her into a fierce hug. ‘It’s all right. I believe you.’

Modwen smiled bitterly. ‘If only the others felt the same.’

‘They will. Give it time. This is but a test of your faith, and soon enough, the truth will be illuminated for all to see.’

‘I pray that you are right.’

*

She did pray. That night, she knelt before the wooden cross in her cell.

‘Please, God, tell me, what have I done to earn your punishment? Why have I fallen from your Grace? I have been your ever-faithful servant, but now I am called a whore, and I don’t know what you want of me. Please give me a sign, anything, to guide me right now.’

She waited for his response, but as the moments passed, she heard no reply, felt no radiating warmth.

Nothing.

Her heart sank.

Crestfallen, she snuffed out her candle and crawled into her straw cot, letting sleep claim her. In her dreams, she stood at the shore in nothing but her linen shift, her hair unbound. The waves lapped at her feet, and beyond, a light tantalised her from beneath the waves, beckoning her like a will-o’-the-wisp.

She followed that light, wading out into the water. She ducked her head under the surface, and an otherworldly chorus filled her ears. It was the most beautiful sound she had ever heard.

She floated weightlessly, listening to it – entranced – when a radiant light surged to greet her, enveloping her, and she cried out in searing pain and religious ecstasy.

Gasping, she awoke with a newfound clarity. He was not punishing her. He had chosen her to carry His child! That day, her steps felt lighter. Any judging eyes no longer weighed on her, for she had been freed of the shackles of her shame.

She was walking through the inner courtyard when Aghna took notice.

‘You seem cheerier,’ Aghna remarked.

‘That’s because I am.’

‘Oh? What brought on this change of mood?’

Modwen glanced around at the other nuns milling about. ‘Come with me,’ she said, hooking her elbow through Aghna’s. She steered her to a secluded alcove where a statue of the Virgin Mary loomed over them.

There was no one else in sight, but to be safe, Modwen lowered her voice to a whisper. ‘He visited me in my dream last night and spoke to me.’

Aghna squealed, leaning forward conspiratorially. ‘Tell me, what did He say? What does He look like?’

Modwen shook her head. ‘I don’t know. He was clothed in a blinding light and spoke in an ancient tongue I did not know, and yet, I could understand its meaning.’ Her hand went protectively to her stomach. ‘I know now that I was chosen to carry this child and that he will change the world.’

‘See? I told you—’

She was cut off by the sound of footsteps, accompanied by a man’s voice. ‘Whore.’

Brother Cillian appeared, anger painted across his face. He was the abbey’s sacrist, and he had overheard at least part of their conversation. How much? Modwen did not know.

An icy pit grew in her stomach. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘You swore to devote all your love to God, and it seems in the weakness of your flesh, you could not keep that oath.’

‘I did, and it’s His child I carry.’

‘You—’ His eyes bulged. ‘How dare you! You would blaspheme God to cover up for your sins. Have you no shame?’

Blessedly, Aghna stepped in to defend her. ‘It is not blasphemy she speaks, but the truth. God is capable of such miracles, or do you doubt His power?’

His lip curled back in a sneer. ‘Oh, it’s not God’s power I doubt, it’s her chastity that’s in question here.’

‘Then your distrust is a reflection of your own character. Sister Modwen has been nothing but an exemplary nun at the abbey, never untoward to any of the monks or pilgrims.’

He scoffed a laugh and stormed past. But as he walked by Modwen, he bent down, dangerously close, and whispered in her ear, ‘You may have led this poor sister astray with your wiles, but I see past your deceptions, harlot. I will find out who is the father of your child, and I will have you watch him castrated before you.’

She stared him levelly in the eye, unflinching. ‘Perhaps you should remove the dirt from your eyes, monk. I have deceived no one, but you, on the other hand, have deceived yourself if you think me a liar.’

He drew back. He worked his jaw, fighting back some foul retort, before settling with, ‘We shall see about that.’

He left them, and when he was well out of earshot, Aghna tittered. ‘Brother Cillian is envious that you have been so blessed by God.’

‘Yes, he is,’ she agreed, ‘but I fear you and I have made a powerful enemy. No doubt, he’s going to tattle to the abbess, and both you and I will land in hot stew over it.’

‘Then let us both simmer in the cooking pot together.’

*

Modwen was half-right. It was she who drew the brunt of Brother Cillian’s ire. Not three days passed before Sister Dorinnia approached her in the kitchens.

‘A moment please,’ Sister Dorinnia said curtly. After glancing around at the nosy kitchen servants, she added, ‘In private.’

They squeezed into a storeroom filled with loaves of bread and sacks of potatoes. With the two of them alone, Modwen rounded on Sister Dorinnia, feigning ignorance. ‘Yes, what is it? Do you have further chores for me?’

‘Don’t play coy with me,’ she snapped. ‘It appears your flapping tongue has spread wild rumours we can contain no longer. Tomorrow, we’ll settle this foolishness once and for all and have a midwife come to see if your virtue is still intact.’

‘And should she declare me a virgin?’

Sister Dorinnia raised a sceptical brow. ‘Then we will praise you as a miracle and release you of your cleaning duties.’

‘Very well, bring the midwife if that will dispel your doubt.’

*

‘My eyes cannot believe it, but she is *virgo intacta*,’ the midwife declared.

‘A miracle,’ Sister Caitriona breathed.

‘Saint Modwen!’ Sister Brigid cried.

‘She hasn’t been venerated as a saint yet,’ said the abbess dryly, ‘but perhaps she spoke the truth and, by some miracle, she has conceived a child.’

The abbess turned to Modwen. ‘It appears that I’ve judged you too quickly, and for that, I ask your forgiveness.’

Relief flooded Modwen. She wanted to jump with joy and run through the halls, shouting, ‘See? See? I spoke the truth!’

Instead, she swallowed her pride. She composed herself and bowed her head. ‘I don’t blame you for your scepticism, Reverend Mother, when I could scarcely believe it myself.’

*

Whispers of a blessed nun spread across Ireland. Pilgrims flocked to see her. *Sancta Modwen*, they called her, and the once reproachful looks the other nuns gave her now turned to awe. She spent her days embroidering alongside the privileged nuns who had come from wealthier families. They fussed over her like clucking hens, and Modwen could not help but feel a tinge of smugness as Brother Cillian seethed at her good fortune.

However, despite her newfound bliss, a part of her was not content. Initially, she dismissed this as a typical symptom of pregnancy, but her cravings grew stranger and stranger.

At first, she found herself constantly craving mussels and fish. Since the abbey was perched on the Irish coast, fortunately, they were in no short supply. Then, she developed an unquenchable thirst. She drank more and more water, but spring water from a well did not fully satisfy her. No, she possessed a peculiar yearning for the sea – to drink it and be a part of it. She wanted to slip into the water like a selkie and disappear into its depths.

She found herself unconsciously staring out in its direction during the day, but the urge to walk out into the waves came to her strongest at night, making sleep difficult. Her baby twisted restlessly, and her legs itched like nettles.

Finally, she could bear it no more. She snuck out to the shore in the predawn light. She cupped her hands into the sea and brought the briny salt water to her lips. She sighed as a wave of contentment washed over her.

‘You love the sea, don’t you?’ she cooed to her baby. ‘So do I.’

She had felt herself drawn to the sea ever since she was a child and would play amongst the tide pools, collecting mussels and shells. That much hadn’t changed since she swore her oaths and donned her habit. If anything, that feeling had only intensified until it

plagued both her dreams and her waking moments. Even now, a distant singing called to her, beckoning her, just like in her dream.

‘Please, give me more time. I’m not ready!’ she pleaded.

In her heart of hearts, she knew it was selfish, but she wasn’t ready to leave the abbey, Aghna, her life on land behind just yet. She wanted to at least give proper goodbyes first, so she turned to head back to the abbey before she could be lured out even further.

That was her mistake.

She had made it to the courtyard when she felt a sharp tug. Something burst inside her belly. Water gushed between her legs, and she stared down at the puddle of water at her feet. ‘No, no, no,’ she groaned. ‘It’s too early.’

She staggered toward the nuns’ cells, clutching her stomach. In the hallway of the cloister, she stumbled across Sister Caitriona, who was holding a candle. At the sight of Modwen, recognition and alarm flashed across her face.

She rushed to steady her. ‘Sister Modwen? What in the Heavens are you doing out at this hour?’

Delirious with pain, all that escaped her lips was, ‘Help me.’

Someone called for a midwife and led her to her cell, guiding her to her bed.

She lay there in agony when the abbess stormed in to see her, furious. ‘Has madness taken you? You’re soaked to the bone.’

‘My baby was restless, and I—I couldn’t sleep. I thought the fresh air would soothe me.’

‘Foolish girl. You’ve just jeopardized your child and this abbey’s reputation along with it. If the baby dies—’

‘He won’t,’ she said fiercely, gripping the abbess’s forearm with as much strength as she had left. ‘My baby is alive, and he will live. I have seen it, but he wants out. *Now.*’

She felt him writhing, clawing his way out of her to get into the world. She felt like she was being torn from the inside out. The pain was unbearable, searing, and it threatened to consume her. Thrashing, she let out a piercing scream, and it wasn’t long before a chorus of screams joined her.

‘Monstrosity!’

‘Ungodly abomination!’

She heard a thud as the abbess fainted to the floor.

Utterly exhausted, Modwen sank back into her bed, her hair plastered with sweat to her forehead. Her body ached, but she no longer felt her baby wriggling inside.

No, she felt movement outside of her now. She heard squelching and felt her baby crawling atop her stomach, inching toward her breast. She craned her head to peer down at him, smiling. Beneath the viscera, translucent, opalescent skin peeked through, and intelligent eyes stared back at her.

He was so beautiful.

She wept with pain and joy as love surged through her, and he reached out a tentacled arm to tenderly wipe the tears from her cheek and clicked his small beak at her.

‘My little angel,’ she murmured.