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For my mum, Sally



An Unfamiliar Pain

Lancashire, 1620

Annie sleeps curled up on the bed we share, wet thumb fallen from her mouth. I kneel, calling and shaking her. She frowns and mutters.

‘Wake up,’ I say.

She pushes me off and turns her back.

‘Get up. Time to search.’

Her eyes open and she sits forward, clutching my arm. ‘Has he come?’

‘We rang the bell, didn’t we? And the ash is untouched.’

She looks to see that the thin ring around the bed shows no trace of his hoof print.

‘I’m safe, then,’ she says, lying back down.

‘No.’ I pull her to her feet. Have to know she’s free for another day. Too late for me, I’m doomed to a future I cannot escape, but she may yet be saved. She’s so scrawny I could carry her with one hand. Ignoring her complaints, I drag her over to the weak light of the slit in the wall, standing in the

narrow space between our mat and Mam's, and begin the daily ritual. I pull the clothes over her head and she stands, naked and shivering, as I search every part of her skin.

I start with her side, where my mark lies, the rounded shape of his mouth berry-red. Her side is clear, white goose-pimpled skin stretched tight over jagged bone. I lift and turn her arms, spread her fingers to inspect the flesh between them, look behind her knees and on the underside of each foot. The flea bites she has picked are rough but the mark I pray I will never find would be flat and dark. A stain that no washing can remove, though God knows I have tried. As she bows her head I hold her hair and search the back of her neck.

She is not his yet.

I pull her into my arms and cradle her. 'Nowt.' Let out my breath at last. Every day I begin by reassuring her. Every day I begin with foreboding.

She springs from our mat through the doorway to John's empty one and back, clapping her grimy hands. 'He doesn't want me.' She smiles, wipes her nose and licks off the slime trail it leaves.

I laugh and pull the clothes on over her head before she skips away into the other room to stand in the spilled ashes from the fire and take what warmth she may.

Mam has risen from bed, blanket pulled around her as she stands in the doorway.

'No visit?' she asks, words sliding through the gaps in her teeth.

I shake my head.

'He'll come. None of your tricks can stop him.' She glances at her familiar, a hare, harmless to us but a willing carrier of curses, she says. It appears only to her, but we know its

presence by her whispered words of love and plans of ruin. 'We know it, do we not, Dew-Springer?' I stare, trying to see its footprints in the ash or glimpse it shifting around her feet. Nothing.

Squeezing past John's mat and the table to reach the fire, she waves Annie away, and pokes the lifeless ashes, dust rising and coating the mould on the wall. The blanket falls from her shoulders, showing the ridge of her backbone, and her own mark.

'Firewood,' she says.

'I'll go to the shore, fetch some driftwood. Perhaps find some clams.'

'Help me wipe her first?'

I dip a rag into the bucket and Mam catches Annie before she can run. She cries out and struggles as I scrub her dirty face and hands, but hasn't the strength to escape. We gave her the last of the bread two days ago.

'Dolts,' she shouts, fists clenched and teeth bared. Mam and I try to control our laughter at her angry face, damp hair sprouting out. 'Gormless.'

The door bangs against the wall and we stare at John as he stands with legs apart, hands behind his back and elbows out, trying to bulk his thin frame.

'You'll never guess what I got,' he says.

'A bird,' Annie says. 'A spadger, a little brown one?'

John rolls his eyes. 'Why would I bring a bird, squirrel?'

'Be more use than you,' I say.

Annie wipes her nose on her sleeve and shrugs. 'No matter, there's spadgers in the woods. I'll get my own.'

'No, guess properly. Guess what I got.'

'A clout is what you'll get if you don't tell us,' Mam says.

A toothless threat. She has never raised a hand to us. Only once I've seen her driven to violence. A swift and deep fury, rising to protect her own.

John swings a fist round from behind his back, puffing up as though he has a chest of gold. Mam gasps.

From his hand dangles the body of a lamb. Blood drips on to the floor, a steady pat, pat, pat.

Mam staggers over and gathers him into her arms, lamb and all. The back of his tunic is stained red. 'Oh, John. You're quite the man. We're saved.'

She is right. Without this we have nothing but scraps from shore and hedgerow to eat. The steady drip is mesmerising, beat of it against the floor, spreading puddle at his feet. A trail up the hill, and through the abandoned shell of a hamlet surrounding us, that will lead straight to our house.

John flushes and shakes her off. 'It's only a little 'un.'

She takes it from him, turning and examining its limp body, holding a bowl to catch the precious blood. 'Makes the meat all the sweeter. Plenty here for us.'

'And I know where there's turnips.'

'Then go, lad. We'll have a feast. Annie wipe the table, Sarah fetch my knife.'

John runs out of the door and I bring the knife, but Annie stays where she is.

'It's so small,' she says.

'Big enough to feed us all,' I reply.

'It's a babby.'

I stop and look at her. She is watching Mam split and strip the skin, the white wool now stained crimson. Tears stand in her eyes. She wipes the back of her hand across her mouth, lips wet.

I kneel in front of her, take her bony shoulders in my hands. 'He killed it quickly. It didn't feel a thing.'

She stares past me at the lamb, now no more than a lump of meat on our table.

'Come with me, little cub,' I say. 'We'll collect seaweed to have with it and wood to build the fire.'

I take her hand and walk her out of the door.

We eat long before the sun has reached its peak. A feast the like of which we can't remember, one that should be saved for evening but we cannot wait. John fetches turnips, Annie and I find a little seaweed, and they are cooked in the pot together with the lamb. A meal richer than we are used to, meat full of flavour as it falls apart in the mouth.

Once the food is in front of him John digs in with his fingers, shoving turnips into his mouth so that pieces fall and stick to his chin, tearing into the meat with his teeth.

Mam, Annie and I are only a little more controlled, eating without pause. We neither speak nor look up from the bowls until they're bare.

I lean back in my seat, sigh, clutch my tight belly. There is an unfamiliar pain there. The pain of greed. John looks around at us, a king who has fed his people.

'You did well, son. There'll be more to come too. Broth from the bones. The blood I can use for curses and the money will buy us more food.'

John lets out a long, loud belch. Annie laughs and even Mam smiles.

'How did you come by the lamb?' I ask.

Silence for a moment. Mam rises and begins to gather the bowls, her movements swift and jarring.

John shifts in his seat, looks down at the back of his hand and scratches it. 'Took one of the Taylors', didn't I? Out on the path, anybody's to keep.'

'Stolen.'

'Of course stole, did you think I'd found fairies' gold to pay for it?'

'Didn't work for it, then?'

'It was on the track, free for the taking,' Mam says.

'Not free, stolen. He could hang for this.'

'They won't hang John,' Annie says, chewing on a grimy nail. 'We'll never let them, Mammy will curse their eyes to fall out and I'll feed them to the birds in the woods so they'll not find him. They won't hang you, will they, John?'

'No need, little squirrel. Lamb was out of the field, could've been wild for all I knew. Won't be missed, unless Sarah's wretched conscience gets the better of her.'

'If you worked ...'

'There's no one'll have me, I've banged on every door asking for every task and not a soul will give me one.'

'It makes a truth of all they say about us.'

Mam slams the bowls back on to the table. 'They say it and we must be it. Would you have me choose the other?' She holds my gaze until I look away.

'Besides,' she says. 'That Matt Taylor has plenty, he won't miss a little lamb. And he's a gudgeon if ever there was one, him and that mewling son of his.'

I sit at the still-cluttered table as John sharpens his knife on a stone and shadow creeps in from the walls. Mam has set the lamb's head to boil, having saved the eyes. When the skull is

clean and white we'll take it to the village and someone shall be pleased to have it buried in their home as a charm to protect from evil spirits. The stench fills the house.

'Mammy?' Annie says around her thumb. 'Tell me how I began?'

The scrape of the knife stops. Mam leaves her pot and sits with Annie. Sometimes she pushes her away when this question is asked, sometimes tells stories of sunny days.

'Your beginning was like no other. You were a gift, sprung from the ground, filled with enchantment.'

Annie nestles against her. 'Filled of magic, aren't I, Mammy? But Sarah and John had a daddy.' Her mouth droops. 'I wish I'd a daddy.'

'He was a good man.'

A memory comes upon me, so swiftly here and gone that I barely feel its presence, of his warm hand resting upon my head, of the scent of salt-soaked clothes.

In the gathering gloom Mam's expression is hidden, but the way she tips her head tells me that she's losing herself into the past. I try to catch John's eye but he is busy smoothing his sharpening stone on the cloth of his tunic.

'He was tall,' Mam says. 'High as a tree with arms thick as branches.'

I hold myself tight, knowing she skims her memories and chooses the brightest to share now. Others may come later.

John snorts. The knife scrapes again. He was five when our father died, the age Annie is now. There cannot be much he remembers.

'That's just his look,' Annie says. 'What was he like?'

'His hair was curly, black and shiny like a pebble wet with seawater, and his eyes were the colour of the sea itself.'

Mam's face is turned away from Annie now. 'He called me beautiful. My skin was the prettiest ever seen, he said. Smooth and fair as fresh-churned cream.'

Annie's thumb leaves her mouth with a pop. 'But what was he like, Mammy? You're not hearing.'

'She's tired,' I say, standing. This nonsense must stop. 'And so are you. Bed. I'll fetch the bell.'

'I don't want to.' Annie crosses her arms, dips her chin into her chest.

John taps his knife against the rock, holding it close to his eyes so that he may see it in the fading light. He does not look up.

'Darkening out,' he says. 'Night's come. And you know who comes with it, looking for new blood.'

I smack my palm across the back of his head. 'Stop that, goffy.'

Annie is across the room instantly, little hand slipping into my own, and John sits back, eyebrows raised, feet on the table.

Mam stays on the bed, arms about her knees. Annie and I take the bell, her hand over mine. Three rings in each of the eight corners of the house, then we place it back on the floor by the fire.

'There,' I say. 'Safe now.'

'Will you lie with me?'

I glance at Mam. Her body stays as before, her mind trapped in memory.

'All right,' I say.

We study the ring around the bed before lying down. Unbroken. Tomorrow I shall sweep it away and make a fresh one as I always do, trickling ash from the fire through my closed fist, steadily, so the loop remains constant. It is all I can do to keep her safe, and this is all I wish for. It is there to

protect Annie, not me, for he does not make return visits, I'm told.

She curls up next to me and I pull the blanket over us both. Her arms hot around my neck, breath sour with the food. The stink of the lamb's head hangs in the air.

I've no memory of the night he came, marked my skin and drank from me. Choosing me for a purpose I have yet to discover. The dark red patch on my side has been there for as long as I remember. Mam didn't tell me what it meant until I was twelve and before this I had thought nothing of the stain I carried, finding no more significance in it than my blue eyes or unruly hair. She ignored my tears, as the possible lives I had dreamed for myself shrank to one. They remain for Annie, though.

She sucks her thumb and winds my hair around her fingers. All I can hear is John's knife scraping against his toenails, his chewing as he lifts the shavings to his mouth. Of course he does not carry the mark, and I used to envy such freedom to choose a skill and carve his own path. But now I look to the lives John may have and see nothing but this one he already lives.

'People will pay for the blood.'

I start as Mam's voice cuts across the room. Annie's eyes open, the steady sucking on her thumb stops.

'Shh,' I say to them both.

'Good for curses. A death mark in blood, that'll satisfy. Then they may pay for the cure too.'

'You've woken Annie.' Irritation makes me bold, so that my words surprise even myself. Mam does not respond.

'And the eyes,' she says. 'Everyone wants an eye kept on their enemies. You've fed us for a week with this, John. Next time fetch a bigger one.'

I sit up and the hair Annie clutches in her sticky fingers is pulled from my head. ‘There’ll be no next time.’

‘Then what should we live on?’ The quietness of Mam’s voice suggests as much anger as if it were raised.

‘We can manage.’

‘And what form of managing do you think I should take up next, if your brother’s not to help me? What choices are left me since your father’s gone?’

Annie wriggles and whimpers. It’s the same every time. Mam’s thoughts of my father begin sweet as nectar and end bitter as wormwood.

She turns her back but speaks clearly enough. ‘You’re a woman now. There are ways other than begging that you can be of use.’

No more to be spoken. The only sounds are Annie’s slow breaths and the shuffling of Mam and John as they prepare for bed, the rustle of mice nesting in our mats. I lie awake, seething with thoughts of what my life might have been had I freedom to choose, and what it must be knowing I do not. But I will not give up all command over myself. If Mam thinks to dress and paint me and let me be used by the village men, I will maim them one by one before earning a single coin. If it’s witchcraft she speaks of I’ll have none. His dark power is in me, I have felt it, waiting to be unlocked. I am marked, my fate to one day conjure my own familiar and spin curses as Mam does. But not this day.

Lying in the darkness, I listen to the creaking of door and roof, the shifting of branches in wind. Feel his prowling presence, reaching to the anger that twists in me, calling upon me to embrace it, and become my true self.