

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: New Fabulist Fiction: How the Fairy Tale Lives on in the 21st Century with “The In-Betweens and Further Fables”

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Abstract Approved:

This creative thesis explores the definition and features of the New Fabulist genre and contains a manuscript of three stories that fit within the parameters of this genre. The critical foreword analyzes the emergence of New Fabulism, and the fictional stories locate Irish folklore within its parameters. New Fabulist literature is realist fiction that takes place in a world strongly resembling our own, with the exception of a magical element unexplained by our reality. It utilizes fairy tale archetypes and storylines in order to bring to light the realities of the human condition and to help the audience process those realities. Many New Fabulist authors utilize traditional fairy and folk tales as inspiration for their work. The magic presented in these tales forces the characters to confront their own frailties, to either rise to the occasion or fall to their own foibles. This is a newly defined genre, and as such, critical research on the topic is emerging. This thesis seeks to discover much of that research and add to critical conversation and artistic innovation of the genre. This thesis performs a close reading of three existing New Fabulist texts in order to discover and analyze their use of the genre, then uses that research to analyze figures in Irish folklore and utilizes those figures in order to create an original manuscript that is contextualized within this discussion.

Keywords: New Fabulism, fairy tale, archetypes, Irish folklore

NEW FABULIST FICTION:
HOW THE FAIRY TALE LIVES IN THE 21ST CENTURY
WITH
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	v
CRITICAL FOREWORD.....	1
WORKS CITED.....	11
<u>“The In-Betweens” and Further Fables</u>	
1 The Girl with Stormy Eyes.....	12
2 The Banshee of County Limerick.....	17
3 The In-Betweens.....	31
PERMISSION TO COPY.....	45

CRITICAL FOREWORD

In the wide scope of genres that have developed in the last hundred years, one stands out from the rest as both a tribute to historical narratives and as a fresh approach to writing: New Fabulism, a genre in which fantastical elements are incorporated into a realistic setting to reveal truths about the human condition using the traditional narratives and archetypes established in traditional fairy and folk tales. Much of the popularity of New Fabulism comes from a desire in modern culture to work back to the stories at the root of humanity's subconscious, to find comfort in something permanent and primal. Rather than being a method of escapism, New Fabulism becomes a method of addressing unspoken problems within a home or society, or issues surrounding the individual.

A close observation of New Fabulist fiction reveals a consistent set of characteristics, although it is important to note that not every story that could be classified as New Fabulism contains every one of these characteristics. New Fabulist literature incorporates traditional folk tales and the familiar narratives that go along with those tales. These folk tales are grounded within a realistic historical or contemporary setting, but that setting is somehow different from our own world; this results in a slippery style and a defamiliarization with the world as it exists in reality. However, New Fabulist literature uses these fairy tales and realistic settings to explore topics such as race, abusive relationships, personal identity, or even the cruelty of a particular historical time and place. This genre uses the traditional archetypes established in fairy tales in order to explore the aforementioned themes.

Within New Fabulism, the use of fairy and folk tales has a special significance. The genre can be considered a subgenre of magical realism, a genre that was explored by Alejo Carpentier. Magical realism is defined as "a chiefly Latin-American narrative strategy that is characterized by the matter-of-fact inclusion of fantastic or mythical elements into seemingly realistic fiction" ("magic realism" n.p.). According to Eugene Arva in his essay "Writing the Vanishing Real: Hyperreality and Magical Realism," "[m]agical realist authors turn to illusion and magic as a matter of survival in a civilization priding itself on scientific accomplishments, positivist thinking, and the metaphysical banishment of death" (61). As a subgenre of this practice, New Fabulist authors choose to use fairy tale archetypes and storylines as the illusion and magic. The use of these familiar stories frees the author and the audience in a way. By choosing a story that is so foundational to human consciousness and using its archetypes, the New Fabulist author is able to shift the focus from plot to that of theme. "The deceptively simple language and structure of fairy tales actually allows for other elements--from the sexual to the philosophical--to stand out" (Michel n.p.). These "other elements" are those explorations of the human condition and all that goes along with that. The fairy tale story also returns to some of those primal human anxieties, the same anxieties that people have been feeling for as long as there have been people: fear of the unknown, death, or a life lived without love or acceptance.

An exploration into some New Fabulist fiction is necessary in order to get a fair sense of what the genre can accomplish. In Helen Oyeyemi's novel *Boy, Snow, Bird*, the story of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarves" is used to discuss and unpack the phrase

“fairest of them all” quite literally in order to explore the ideas of racism and inequality in 1950’s America. It follows the story of a young woman named Boy, who marries a man with a daughter named Snow. Boy loves her husband and new daughter to the best of her abilities. But the birth of Boy’s daughter reveals that her husband Arturo Whitman is a black man who has been passing as white. Although Boy does not love her husband or child any less for their race, Boy’s daughter has darker skin than her stepdaughter and thus suffers more persecution and fewer opportunities, which is the cause of resentment between the now-sympathetic stepmother and Oyeyemi’s Snow White (Oyeyemi n.p.). There are no seven dwarves in this story, but the familiar storyline and the exploration of beauty and identity have a deeper reflection for the reader, taking themes that were already present in the original story and exploring them to a deeper extent. The novel explores more deeply the relationship between the “Evil Queen” and Snow White than the original did. Oyeyemi does this by placing the fairy tale in a realistic context and giving its theme of social inequality more weight and focus. She also does a great deal of exploration of the relationship between Snow and her “evil” stepmother.

Other writers make use of familiar fairy tale reimaginings as well. Catherynne M. Valente’s novel *Deathless* is another excellent example of New Fabulist fiction, taking the Russian story of “The Death of Koschei the Deathless” and setting it during the time of the Russian Revolution and the rise of the Soviet Union. All the elements of the original story are there: Marya the warrior princess, Ivan her lover, the involvement of Baba Yaga and Koschei’s ultimate demise (Valente n.p.). The narrative already exists, and because this story has been used and reused, setting it in the time of the Soviet Revolution serves to help the reader understand that tumultuous time and unpack the cruel behavior associated with it.

A third example is Leigh Bardugo’s “The Witch of Duva,” a short story in a collection of written fairy tales that seeks to explore the theme and various meanings of hunger in “Hansel and Gretel” (Bardugo 79-116). While hunger in the world of the fairy tale is an almost universal condition, the hunger in Bardugo’s narrative is more than literal. Bardugo investigates the voracious hunger that directs inwardly, to ourselves and those around us rather than outward, towards surviving nature. It explores the fears of people’s dark hungers and desires using the familiar storyline of “Hansel and Gretel” and adding the twist of the father being the villain. Bardugo’s story and others like it create a “forced catharsis—we must confront the thing that lives in our house, in our marriage, in our family, in our town—the succubus that sits on our throats when we dream” (Sparks n.p.). The fairy tales, by using the original archetypes in new ways, allow the author to explore the causes of anxiety in the human condition. The theme of hunger in the story, along with the audience’s expectation of the female characters being evil, is brought to the surface for the audience in Bardugo’s take on the tale.

So why is it that authors use these fairy tales to explore themes that could be done with a new story? Why choose to use a fairy tale specifically when most stories work with a basic set of DNA? New Fabulism actually strips the artifice of distraction, our focus on our contemporary concerns, in order to highlight the universal story that has been there all along. According to Arva:

The deceptive simplicity of magical realist images, their coherence, vividness, and emotional charge, enables readers to see and to feel—without necessarily understanding—the indescribable horrors of the past. Magical realism writes what I have called the vanishing Real by supplanting it with a hybrid reality of emotionally relevant constructs (corresponding roughly to the magical/creative part of the writing mode) and partially processed concepts (corresponding to its realistic/descriptive impetus). (75)

Within the structure of an archetypal story, the authors enter into worlds where themes can be explored on a symbolic level differently than if the text were wholly realistic, or even a new story. Fairy tales do this through archetypes: the wolf in the woods is a sexual predator, the evil mother figure as the competition between generations for resources, the animal husband as the unknown in a new marriage. A fairy tale reimagining requires less backstory necessary, as the audience is already familiar with the basic structure of the tales that take place “once upon a time,” and the audience can believe these symbolic wonderings by dispensing with realism to a certain extent. The moment fairy tale elements appear, the reader dispenses with entirely concrete ideas of reality and is less surprised when there are events out of the ordinary. By engaging in a fairy tale storyline, the writer enters into an unspoken agreement with the reader to fulfill the expectations set in place by the storyline. This allows the writer to explore the themes of the original tale and perhaps surprise the reader with this theme in a fulfilling way. The reader is able to understand and explore in a unique way what the author is trying to say about internal realities. With New Fabulism, we get us to see our own stories in archetypal ways. The distractions of our contemporariness are quelled by the evocation of a familiar tale, which helps us to focus on the themes in ways that are harder to do in the terrible subjectivity of modernity. New Fabulism evokes a kind of universal human truth by rejecting the expectations of a world defined by the subjectivity of competing ideas.

Although New Fabulism makes use of magical and fantastical stories, it is usually grounded in a historical or contemporary reality. *Electric Literature*, a quarterly literary magazine and a non-profit, says that New Fabulism “incorporates fantastical elements within a realistic setting—distinguishing it from fantasy, in which an entirely created world (with constructed rules and systems) is born” (Sparks n.p.). This realistic setting serves as a way to connect the themes found in fairy tales to the reality of modern life. According to New Fabulist author Shane Hall, “the world behaves logically, and yet completely non-real things are the basis of what’s going on” (Hall n.p.). This more realistic setting can be seen in nearly all New Fabulist literature, yet it is up to the author to determine just *how* real the setting is. For example, within Oyeyemi’s novel, the narrative rarely breaks from the setting of 1953 Massachusetts. The moments that break through that realistic narrative and are magical are grounded entirely within the imaginations of the characters. The historical and cultural setting of the 1950’s in a typical American town are accurate.

To discuss other examples within the previously listed text, Valente’s *Deathless* contains many of the historical events of early 19th century Russia, even if these events

are pushed to the background of the story. For example, Marya's family has been forced to share their large home with other families, as hers was previously what would have been considered by Bolshevik revolutionaries to be bourgeois (Valente 22ff.). Forced redistribution of wealth was a common practice after the communist regime took over in Russia, and this redistribution is depicted in many other famous literary works about the time. However, in Oyeyemi's story the fairy tale elements predominate among the historical accuracies present in the story. If anything, the historical details make the fantasy more believable. The fairy tales highlight the brutalities of the contemporary human situation. While the magic does not resolve the racism, or whatever situation a fairy tale happens to be exploring, it does highlight and explore the way that people react to these things in real life.

Within Valente's story, the chyerti (Russian fairy peoples) take on many of the characteristics of the Soviet Party at the time, calling each other "comrade" and touting many of the Soviet slogans at the time, as seen when Marya stumbles upon the collection of domovoi, or house spirits, in her own home. When Marya questions the domovoi, knowing from the stories that each house is meant to only have one hearth spirit, they reply: "Before the Party, each house only had one family. We have all had to adjust our thinking towards more correct principles, child" (36). In this scene and many others, Valente utilizes the chyerti to illustrate the changes taking place in Russia without having to resort to a historical exposition. The chyerti, by taking on the ideology and characteristics of the Party, become a symbol and metaphor for the cruelty and inhumanity the 20th century regime exhibited. It helps the audience to process that cruelty that was actually perpetuated by human beings by displacing it to a strange and Otherworldly creature. That sort of metaphor is only necessary for children when they hear stories, but its use also helps adults to process meanings and cruel realities as well.

Despite the realistic setting present in New Fabulist fiction, there also exists a certain slipperiness in style (a defamiliarization) with the actual world. The reality found in New Fabulist fiction "does not depend either on natural or physical laws or on the usual conception of the real in Western culture' because it is 'a narrative... in which the relation between incidents, characters, and setting could not be based upon or justified by their status within the physical world or their normal acceptance by bourgeois mentality'" (Simpkins 142). As stated above, it is enough for a reader to know that fairy tale elements are present in order for them to dispense with their own reality and focus on the author's intended message. However, this break with reality has a purpose. According to Arva, "[t]he uncanniness of the magical realist image is due to an aesthetic experience that privileges experience over knowledge" (Arva 80). Authors use what formalists referred to as "defamiliarization" in order to foreground internal truths about human reality.

A particular example of this demilitarization within New Fabulist fiction can be found in Oyeyemi's novel, when Boy first comes to the town of Flax Hill and cannot find her way around:

As for Flax Hill itself, I was on shaky terms with it for the first few months. Neither of us was sure whether or not I genuinely intended to stick around. And so the town misbehaved a little, collapsing when I

went to sleep and reassembling in the morning in a slapdash manner; I kept passing park benches and telephone booths and entrances to alleyways that I was absolutely certain hadn't been there the evening before. (15)

What could have been a simple description of getting lost in a new town, in Oyeyemi's capable hands becomes an opportunity for magic. The audience is transported by this description into the not-quite-familiar world that New Fabulism lives in. Boy's internal experience is emphasized over the external reality, and it does this by framing it as a magical occurrence. The town is also personified, given a symbolic will, just as places take on a character and will in the human mind. The town does not actually attempt to disrupt Boy's life, just as circumstantial events do not intentionally disrupt our own; however, our superstitious nature can make it seem that way.

Another example of this can be found in Bardugo's "The Witch of Duva" in which young girls are disappearing and the villagers are uncertain what is causing it. Their explanation of this phenomenon reflects their fear and provides them with an explanation for the unexplained:

There was a time when the woods near Duva ate girls. It's been many years since any child was taken. But still, on nights like these, when the wind comes cold from Tsibeya, mothers hold their daughters tight and warn them not to stray too far from home. "Be back before dark," they whisper. "The trees are hungry tonight." (79)

This description focuses more on the human fear of the unknown rather than the truth that a man has been kidnapping, sexually abusing, then eating young girls. The hunger of the trees serves as a safer and more comfortable explanation to the villagers than the reality that their neighbor is the monster. In this story as in many others, wilderness or natural areas inhospitable to human domination are personified as barbarous and hostile. This helps the audience process this strange-but-familiar horror, just as the chyerti in Valente's story help them cope. The stories seem to allow us to get closer to the brutality by evoking it but associating it with magic so that we remain in a state of wonder, open to experiencing it more fully than we would if confronted with human brutality, which evokes a parasympathetic response and to which we have to numb ourselves in order to continue watching.

This slippery style, in which ordinary occurrences such as getting lost in a new place become magical moving walls, and inclusion of magical elements within a realistic setting, helps readers explore difficult truths about ourselves and our own world. This style explores everyday life in a way that is unique and somewhat freeing from that of fiction that is entirely realistic. "Magic realism [of which New Fabulism is a part] courts the inevitable problem of signification by offering the impression of success, a supplemental diversion which appears to bypass the limitations of the realistic text, evading its failures through the incorporation of imagination" (Simpkins 149). New Fabulism provides a more comfortable way for readers to explore and confront their own anxieties. In fairy tales, the dragon is defeated, the evil witch gets her comeuppance, and those who are virtuous receive their just reward. Many of the authors discussing this

genre argue that because the unrealistic elements elevate experience over the physical reality, this type of fiction is more real than reality itself—it reflects what a person feels to be true internally as external reality. To the instinctual and often frightened human being, the forest does appear to eat young girls and the world does rearrange itself over night when unfamiliar with a new place. This has been true as long as fairy tales have been told, just as an arranged marriage could seem like being sold to a strange beast, or a father protecting his daughter from sexual maturity could seem to be locking her in a tower.

New Fabulism helps the reader to work through the anxieties of living. The tales point out that every life, even the most seemingly mundane, holds within it some capacity to witness the darkest truths about human nature. The fairy tale setting makes the story just different enough from our own observed reality as to make the reader able to unpack with the themes and anxieties being presented without being too put off by it. By offering the option of escapism but then confronting the reader with these themes, the story serves as this forced catharsis that Sparks discusses. *Deathless* is an excellent example of this; it allows Marya and the reader to work through the horrors inflicted by the Soviet Union at its inception in a symbolic sense. Marya is able to defeat Koschei, the leader of the chyerti, the Otherworldly people that have perpetuated these cruelties and crimes. In doing so, she is able to kill the Soviet Union and its cruelty. She is also able to come to terms with the cruelty that she herself possesses, the dark side of her human nature that Koschei awakens in her, just as the events of the Soviet Revolution awoke cruelty in one's own neighbor. Symbolism and allegory do this in other fiction, but New Fabulism chooses to use fairy tales in particular to find its symbols. As Marya is told in the novel: "War is not for winning... It is for surviving" (Valente 93). Marya and the reader survive the war presented in the novel, but they come out the other side changed.

Many realities are explored in the fantastical world of *Deathless*, such as realities about the relationships between men and women, and specifically how love and relationships can often be a war zone and how people use their appearance to gain what they want in the world. Valente presents the battlefield between men and women and how appearances affect that battle with an interesting perspective, represented most strongly in the words of Madame Lebedeva:

"Cosmetics are an extension of the will. Why do you think all men paint themselves when they go to fight? ...When I streak my lips red as foxgloves, I say, Come here, male. I am your mate, and you will not deny me. When I pinch my cheeks and dust them with mother-of-pearl, I say, Death, keep off, I am your enemy, and you will not deny me. I say these things, and the world listens, Masha. Because my magic is as strong as an arm. I am never denied." (143)

Lebedeva describes the subtle way in which women arm themselves for war, as opposed to men's wars. For many women, this is still true today. In the novel, questions about marital fidelity and abuse and war come down to one theme: "A wife must terrify, she must have a stronger arm than a Boyer, and she must know how to rule. That's all that matters in the end. Who is to rule. And if you can't, *tscha!* You've no business with a

ring” (113). Valente’s exploration of spousal abuse is horrific, as well as graphic at times, but the battleground of the Russian Revolution and the Otherworld provide some distance that allows the reader to explore these realities without turning away. This war between the sexes has also been a historical (and often unfortunate current) reality for some marriages, especially in a time in which women had fewer rights and had to scrape for every freedom they could attain.

“The Witch of Duva” also explores a horrific side to human nature, along with what is expected of a traditional story. In her author’s note, Bardugo describes the unease that led her to write the story in the first place:

My favorite version of [“Hansel and Gretel”] was the creepily titled *Nibble Nibble Mousekin* by Joan Walsh Anglund, and it wasn’t the cannibal witch who bothered me. It wasn’t even the selfish stepmother. For me, the real villain was Hansel and Gretel’s father, a man so weak-willed, so cowardly, that he let his wicked wife send his children to the woods to die twice. *Don’t go back*, I would whisper as we approached the inevitable final illustration—happy father reunited with children, evil stepmother banished—and I was always left with a feeling of unease as I turned the last page. (278)

Bardugo’s story is the perfect example of New Fabulist fiction, using the original story and exploring the unease that it left her with when she was young. The reader expects for the stepmother and the witch to be evil within Bardugo’s story; that is what people have been taught to expect when they read stories, the evil of jealous women. However, after Nadya’s (Bardugo’s Gretel) father dies after attempting to eat her, in a scene that has clear implications of consumption as sexual abuse, we are surprised to find that the evil stepmother and the witch in the woods were in fact trying to save Nadya.

The story ends with Nadya learning the witch’s craft and reflecting on the stepmother she lost: “It was not her father she thought of, but Karina...Karina who had driven Nadya into the woods, so that there would be nothing left for her father to use but a ghost. Karina who had given herself to a monster, in the hope of saving just one girl” (112). Bardugo turns the original story on its head, makes physical hunger a symbol for more psychological hunger, and showcases the cowardliness and cruelty of the father in the original “Hansel and Gretel.” This also reflects a sort of unease in our own lives, of the nagging feeling that one does not know the monster in one’s own self or in one’s own home.

Boy, Snow, Bird explores similarly brutal truths through a somewhat magical story, describing the value of being “the fairest of them all”. Arturo tells Boy of how his grandfather had been mistaken for a white man, so the family continued to be so, even sending away one of his sisters with darker skin in order to keep up the ruse. Arturo’s mother, Olivia, has the most difficult time accepting her mixed race granddaughter:

[S]he took one look at Bird, a cold, thorough look, then turned her gaze away. “Well, she’s healthy, thank God.” She then began to insinuate that I’d two-timed Arturo... Next she implied that my background was questionable... “Nice try, but I’m not going to stand

here while a colored woman tries to tell me that maybe I'm the one who's colored." (139)

The story continues exploring the resentments and strain through years, telling of the relationship between Snow and Bird, as well as the protective nature Boy demonstrates over her own child. The use of mirrors and the characters' reactions to them play into the theme of identity, how we perceive ourselves and how others' perception of us affects our own. It plays into the idea of how others' perceptions and estimations of our social status or race affects our own self-worth and identity.

It is important to note that storytellers and authors have been reinventing fairy tales and folk tales for as long as they have existed. According to renowned literary critic Maria Tatar: "[T]here is no original when it comes to fairy tales. To the contrary, these stories circulated in multiple versions, reconfigured by each teller to form a uniquely new tale with distinctly different effects, hence the advantages of referring to multiple forms of a tale rather than variations" (xiii). Much of literary criticism points to the continual reinvention of already existing stories, and this can be seen in much of the work of literary critics and authors such as Tatar, Jack Zipes, Neil Gaiman, and Angela Carter. According to Tatar, "'Make it new' was never a piece of advice you had to give storytellers spinning yarns at communal gatherings. They were always making it new—shamelessly cutting and pasting but always improvising as well—so that their stories would tick and whirr just as smoothly as the ones told the night before" (xix). Because of this, *New Fabulism* is something of a misnomer, but the addition of modern understandings of psychology and culture means that the stories delve even further into the anxieties presented in the originals.

Perhaps what distinguishes *New Fabulism* from former efforts at reinventing fairy tales is these stories' extreme focus on reality, and the ways the universality of the stories cuts through our contemporary subjectivity to evoke what seem more universal truths about humans and their capacity for both brutality and bravery. As discussed previously, the stories put an internal reality at the forefront, thus creating a hyper-reality for the reader. While early, oral fairy tales offered an escape from the mire that was the lives of peasants, now writers use the infusion of magic to explore those realities in a different way than with realistic fiction:

Fairytales and fables offer a third way: a mysterious overgrown path into the unknown forest where stories can operate outside of real or invented rules. We don't worry about the realistic motivations of the evil dwarf's curse nor the backstory of the talking fox. It happened once upon a time, and that's enough to know. With the wave of a wand, the reader is in a space where the surreal, the gothic and the weird can all thrive--and maybe will there be a trail of breadcrumbs to lead you out again. (Michel n.p.)

That sense of strangeness, that surreal, makes for incredibly interesting stories, and fairy tales clearly stories that people need. Otherwise, people would not still be telling them. Fairy tales coincide with an internal sense of reality that is never going away, despite all our efforts to distance ourselves from nature and mortality. We remain human despite

every technological advancement, vulnerable and conscious of danger in the periphery of our existence. Just as the people of Hansel and Gretel fear the darkness of the wilderness, we continue to feel that same fear in regards to our own lives and relationships.

The fear of death will always exist, as will the fear of the unknown, and the fear of rejection. These primal fears have taken on new shapes in a world in which we no longer have to scratch at the dirt and slit the throats of animals with our bare hands in order to survive; however, these fears are just as universal to the human psyche as they were five-hundred years ago. Authors such as Leigh Bardugo, Helen Oyeyemi, and Catherynne M. Valente continue to exemplify these fears in the human subconscious, although those fears have morphed from a fear of the outside world into a fear of the monster within our own heads and homes. These stories will continue to be relevant as long as people tell stories, forever being reshaped and reinvented, but always staying the same at their core, because people will mostly be the same.

Within this collection, “The In-Betweens and Further Fables,” you will find three examples of New Fabulist fiction that attempt to explore and realize what it is that New Fabulist fiction does and can accomplish. All of these stories use some form of Irish folklore in order to explore various themes of human life. Irish (and Celtic) folklore are not as popular as the German and Russian tales that are often used in Disney movies and New Fabulist literature. A long held interest in these stories, along with the fact that they have retained much of their original forms for the past century, has led me to want to bring them into the canon of New Fabulist literature. Within this manuscript, I have chosen to focus on three different figures within Irish folklore for the way that they evoke universal human truths and expose some of the most brutal aspects of human nature: the merrow, the changeling, and the banshee.

“The Girl With Stormy Eyes” uses the story of the Irish merrow (or mermaid) in order to explore complex relationships within the family, both with spouses and parenting. It’s original, “The Lady of Gollerus,” is the story of a man who finds a merrow and makes her his spouse. The husband who enslaves and entraps his wife because he loves her so much is destroyed by that overwhelming desire to keep, and he loses everything. My story serves as a follow-up to that story, the tale of the children who were left behind. I have set it in the 1950’s in order to explore the ideas of marriage and freedom that are clear within the original tale. The story makes use of the more dreamlike, slippery style in which it is not completely clear if the events are actually magic or just real life through the eyes of someone who believes in the existence of magic. This story explores the darker side of human nature in which a wife escapes the clutches of her obsessive, clinging husband. While Dick Fitzgerald falls to his worst impulses in the face of this, his daughter Caitlin not only rises to the challenge but also manages to avoid imitating her own mother by leaving town rather than marrying into another household. Whether these characters are marrows is up to the reader, but the use of that figure and the storyline of “The Lady of Gollerus” explores the topic of a difficult marriage through a realistic setting.

“The Banshee of County Limerick” uses the wailing banshee in order to explore ideas of antiquity versus modernism in society. The banshee within Irish folklore

reflects grief, specifically grief that is not considered pretty or civilized. It also reflects the ancient practice of keening from the Irish culture as a funeral rite. The practice of keening was largely eradicated by the Catholic priesthood in the 19th century in favor of more patriarchal funeral rites. The religious figures in the tale I've written attempt to eradicate the suffering of the locals by bringing them the good word, but they actually become the purveyors of suffering when they deny the community its means of grieving and maintaining the social balance. It was written in an epistolary style in order to reflect the writing style of the time in which the story takes place. Like "The Witch of Duva," this story explores the darker side of living in a small community, with the illnesses and hunger in real life explored through the metaphor of a magical being.

And finally "The In-Betweens" uses the metaphor of the changeling in order to explore the anxieties and sacrifices of being a new mother. The Irish changeling was believed to be a fey child that was swapped by the fairies and left in the place of one's own child. When children would sicken soon after birth, they were often believed to be fairies and were left out to die of exposure in the hopes that the fairies would return the human child. When the child would inevitably die, the parents were left with the comfort that their own child would be dancing with the fairies for eternity. This belief reflects the anxieties and dangers of being a new parent as well as the fragility of young life. Some psychologists believe that changelings could have been an early explanation for autism. Within my own tale, a young single mother must grapple with her fears of inadequacy and selfishness in order to rescue her own child from the fairies. It uses the Otherworld as the receptacle of human fears and inadequacy in much the same way that *Deathless* does with the chyerti as the representation of Soviet cruelty.

All of these stories contain an overarching theme of women who don't quite fit the mold of the roles they are expected to play, "unruly women" it could be said. All of these stories attempt what New Fabulism is capable of: using fairy tale characters and archetypes in order to explore modern and ancient anxieties and relationships. I discovered all these ideas and themes when doing research and carefully reading stories in which these creatures play a role. The themes are already present in the archetypes, and these stories just explore those themes using modern techniques and setting them within a particular realistic setting. The fairy tale archetypes used in these stories are used as literal metaphors that explore the human condition. The magic presented in these tales forces the characters to confront their own frailties, and to either rise to the occasion or fall to their own foibles. This is what New Fabulism does and what these stories do as well.

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THE GIRL WITH STORMY EYES

“Where’s Da?” came a small voice from the bed.

Caitlin looked over from her place at the window where she’d been watching the waves lap at the rocks in the fading light. Her brother Liam’s eyes were serious over his red, runny nose. Caitlin reached for a tissue. “He’ll be along.” She swiped the mucus away from Liam’s upper lip. “Go to sleep now,” she said as she pulled the thin covers up to his shoulders. Reluctantly, Liam settled into his narrow bed and closed his eyes. It was a few minutes before his breathing slowed and his face relaxed.

Their father, Dick Fitzgerald, would be at the nearby pub, eyes red over a Guinness. Or perhaps by this time he was wandering the shores, shouting and kicking rocks into the heedless water. Tomorrow Caitlin might hear a taunt from some of the townspeople that they’d seen him, slumped on a bench with sea shells in his hands and dirt in his hair. That was some nights.

Other nights, the kindly pub owner Michael would manage to talk Dick into his black Ford Anglia and carry him through the Fitzgeralds’ door. Dick would pass out, face down on the faded, yellow sofa, his feet in the air because it was too short for his six-foot frame. Caitlin would thank Michael (it was all so routine that her embarrassment had faded) before pulling her father’s boots off and covering him with the patchwork quilt. She always set a glass of water and a bucket next to him just in case.

She wondered which it would be tonight as she scrubbed the evening’s dishes in the sink. All the windows in the house overlooked the bay. The tide was coming in. Tumultuous, angry waves crashed against rock, ever so slowly grinding it into sand. A lifetime beside the wild Atlantic told Caitlin there was a squall coming. By morning it would be impossible to glimpse the Aran Islands to the West, and no one would take their boats out in the hopes of a catch.

Caitlin couldn’t help but watch the waves, wondering what lay beneath. Her father, when he was sober enough, insisted that her mother was there, sleeping in one of her fourteen oyster beds or combing her long hair beneath her *cohuleen druith*. Caitlin had learned to nod rather than contradict him. She remembered her mother well, although the woman had left when Liam was barely able to roll to his stomach. Occasionally the thought of her would grip Caitlin’s stomach, anger and curiosity and longing mixed all vying for superiority.

Meara had been a beautiful woman, the stuff of the old tales. Her long, dark hair always shone like still water under a full moon, and her mournful eyes were the gray of a stormy sea. Caitlin caught her own reflection in the window. Her mother’s eyes stared out from her face with the same sadness, but that was where the likeness ended. Caitlin took more after her father, with her lank, blond hair and snub nose. It had been eight years since her mother’s disappearance, and still Caitlin heard snatches of conversation from the old women of the town.

“It’s a shame she didn’t take after her mother.”

“Oh yes, she was a beauty to be sure.”

“How Dick got *her* to marry him, I’ll never guess.”

There was never any talk of where her mother came from. Caitlin understood that Meara hadn't been from Doolin, but where her mother was from she'd never heard. The Meara of her memory was just as ethereal as her father believed. Maybe she had emerged from those waves, now frothing and calling from outside the window. Caitlin imagined her mother sitting on a rock in Doolin Harbor, with green scales and iridescent, red seaweed tangled in her hair, the cliffs visible in the distance. She had left when Caitlin was so young.

A thump outside startled Caitlin, and she wiped the suds from her hands before opening the front door to peer outside. It was just a shutter moved by the wind. Caitlin secured it before returning to her work, unable to resist a lingering glance towards the sea before she did. Caitlin could almost imagine that she saw the steeds of Manannan in the foam, bucking and beckoning with strong necks and liquid eyes.

She hummed a tune as she proceeded to dry the chipped dishes and put them away. Caitlin knew she was not a good housekeeper, but she did her best to maintain some order. There had been no one to teach her. Meara had been more prone to walking along the shoreline, collecting bits of shiny stones and shells, braiding Caitlin's thin hair and singing her ancient ballads of the sea and lost homes and lost loves. After Meara was gone, a kindly neighbor, Mrs. Nurse, had come over from time to time to clean and care for Caitlin and Liam, but she had been buried a few years ago now.

Caitlin wondered now how her father had never noticed her mother's sadness, the way she often gazed out into the distance in longing. He had been nothing but a joyful, affectionate husband. Now, Dick had sunken into all the worst stereotypes of the Irish drunkard. "She'll come back to me," he would mumble as he staggered through the door, arm over Michael's shoulder. "Lir took her from me, back to the ocean. Stole her. She'd never leave me or her children."

Liam had taken these stories as truth, and his teacher had informed Caitlin of the teasing in school. "He's told all his classmates that your mother is a merrow," Mr. Gallagher had told her. "He says she's gone to sea with Lir and will return when she's broken some spell."

In a moment of anger two months before, Caitlin insisted to Liam that he stop saying such things. "She left us, Liam! She's just gone, and she's not coming back. Stop being a fool like Da." Liam had promptly burst into tears and hid under his covers with nothing but his dark, smooth hair showing above them. Caitlin used the last of the sugar to make him sweets for dinner as an apology. She could not deny the allure of the idea, that they were grandchildren of the mysterious sea god.

There was a certain appeal to leaving, Caitlin thought as she swept the floor. At times, she found herself eyeing the phone booth in the grocery store, the coin heavy in her pocket. Other young people from the village had gone to America, seeking work and a fresh start in a still-new world. One phone call and she could book passage to America. She could take a ship across the wide ocean and find work in Brooklyn. She could be free of her father. She had been saving what little coin she could, taken from her father's coat pockets as he lay passed out on the sofa and hidden in a tin box beneath the mattress in her and Liam's bedroom. But Caitlin would shake herself from that thought when Liam's

grubby hand found hers, sticky with the sweets that Barney the shop boy would slip him. Caitlin was only vaguely aware that Barney, four years her senior, did so to impress her. He was drawn to those sad, gray eyes like a salmon to its birthplace.

Caitlin sighed at the sound of a scrabbling at the front door. *Thank God for Michael*, she thought. He and her father burst through the door, her father stammering his usual nonsense: "She'll come back, Michael. Just you wait. My Meara..." The western horizon was visible, framing Michael and Dick as they stumbled through the door, a waning moon hanging over the water as if from a string. The moving water made it look as if the moon was swaying gently.

"I'm sure you're right, Dick," answered Michael gently. He peeled off Dick's cloak and eased him onto the sofa. "Let's get you settled down here, man."

Caitlin watched without comment, nodding her thanks at Michael when he straightened up. Dick mumbled more, scrubbing his face against his grubby pillow. "How are you, Caitlin?" Michael asked.

"Well enough," she shrugged.

A pause. "Do you and young Liam have enough?" Michael watched her closely.

Caitlin looked down at her feet and wrapped her arms around her thin shoulders. "We do well enough," she answered.

Michael looked doubtful. He reached into his pocket. From it, he pulled a few coins and placed them deliberately in Caitlin's palm. His look said that he wouldn't allow her to refuse, so Caitlin slipped the money into her apron and offered a cup of tea in return.

He shook his head. "I ought to be going. Rose will be expecting me." Michael left, hanging Dick's coat by the door as he went. The reflection of the moon on the water winked conspiratorially at Caitlin as the snapped shut behind him.

Caitlin looked at her father, beginning to gnaw at her bottom lip. He was fast asleep. Eyeing the mud on his shoes, she gently unlaced them and pulled them off. With a damp cloth, she scrubbed specks of vomit from his unshaven face and collar. Next to him, on the floor so he wouldn't knock them over, Caitlin placed the habitual bucket and water. She'd take care of the mud on the floor in the morning. It would be easier once it was dry. She pulled the quilt up to his shoulders, as she had done with Liam.

Maybe her father had loved Meara too much. All of his hopes and dreams were wrapped up in this mysterious woman who seemed to have come from the sea in a mist or a drop of water. For years, Caitlin had thought Dick's story of finding Meara along the shore had been in jest. He had told it with a now-unfamiliar smile on his face and a sideways glance at his beautiful wife. Her leaving had made Dick believe the story more firmly than his belief in anything else. As she looked at her father, Caitlin's fists clenched, and her breath hitched. She began to shake uncontrollably. Time and again, Dick had told her that he was done drinking. He rarely made it more than a few days. Before tonight, it had been nearly two weeks since his last drink, and Caitlin had begun to hope. It had been foolish of her, but she couldn't help but think their lives could get better.

Caitlin flung herself out the cottage door and stumbled towards the bay, not bothering with shoes or a coat to ward off the chill. The wind clutched at her hair and clothes, and rocks bit at her bare feet. A twisted hawthorn emerged from the darkness to clutch at her dress, and she pulled away. She kept running till she felt her bare feet submerge into the water, and she screamed out into the sea.

A storm of images filled her mind's eye, built by years of daydreams, of what her life could have been. She imagined herself like the other girls of the village. She curled her hair and giggled over boys with her friends. She flirted shamelessly with Barney as he sunk into her eyes but went to Sunday dances with Jim and Domhnall instead, hoping to make him jealous enough to perhaps propose. Liam ran wild with the other neighborhood boys rather than hiding beneath her skirts, pretending to be a Spitfire pilot or army captain and tearing holes in his trousers. Caitlin talked to her mother about everything, and Meara taught her to dress well or sing the old songs. Caitlin's imaginary mother told her stories of when she and Dick had been young, always a little more realistic but just as magical as her father's version.

But it was only the waves that spoke to Caitlin, grumbling and murmuring in rhythmic hunger. She answered with sobs, scrabbling at the smooth rocks with her bare hands, her knees muddy as she threw handfuls of them into the water. *It's all your fault*, she thought, but she wasn't sure where to direct the blame. Maybe at the water, or her mother, or herself. Caitlin sunk onto the cold, wet ground with a ragged gasp. She never told anyone that she remembered the day her mother left.

Caitlin had been nine, the same age Liam was now. She had been playing in her room, pretending a prince was coming to rescue her from an evil witch. The Morrigan was holding her captive in a tower, planning on having her ragged battle crow pluck out Caitlin's eyes. As she crawled on the floor (hiding behind a dry-stone wall as she and the prince escaped the Morrigan's castle), Caitlin discovered a hole in the board near her window. It was a perfect hole, the kind of hole from which fey creatures emerged. The small Caitlin placed her finger in the hole and the board came loose. Peering inside, Caitlin discovered a wee, red cap. She reached into the floor and liberated the cap from its hidden prison. It was the loveliest thing she'd ever seen, gossamer thin but strong. It was a vibrant red that had become uncommon in the restraint of war times. To Caitlin, it was as if the Little Folk themselves had fashioned it and left it there for her to find. Caitlin immediately incorporated this gift into her game. It was a hat fit for a princess after all.

Caitlin could hear Meara singing "Carraigdhoun" as she busied herself with the housework in the next room. Liam, having just been fed, slept soundly in his crib. Caitlin played in the bedroom, growing louder as she helped the prince fight for her freedom. Meara, fearing she would wake little Liam, went back to shush Caitlin. Caitlin stopped her playing when she saw Meara frozen in the doorway; she sensed that she had done something wrong she didn't quite understand.

Her eyes never leaving the cap on Caitlin's head, a myriad of expressions crossed Meara's face: confusion, realization, anger, sadness, longing. In the midst of this, Caitlin noticed her mother in the room and went still, having some small understanding that this

was something new. She had never seen her mother this way. Meara took the cap from Caitlin's head, weighing it in her hands like a lost memory. She appeared younger than she had moments before. Despite being indoors, her hair seemed to gleam with an oceanic light and move in a kaleidoscope of browns and reds. Meara transformed before Caitlin's eyes from a worn housewife to a lithe, ethereal woman.

The emotions flowed through Meara and settled into determination. Without another glance, Meara walked out the door, cap in hand, without even a kiss goodbye. Dick Fitzgerald had come home to two screaming children and no wife to be found.

Now Caitlin pushed herself to her feet, standing on that same precipice at which her mother once stood. She felt her own transformation, felt the swell of confusion and oppression settle at her feet. Taking a deep breath, she turned her back on the water. Gingerly, she picked her way back to the house, now mindful of her wounded feet. She passed into the still-open door, passed her unconscious father on the sofa, his snores wet and halting.

Caitlin picked up a bag, filling it with whatever she could reach, heedless of neatness and only concerned with speed and stealth. She found her own hiding space, beneath her mattress in the corner of the metal bed frame. From the space, she pulled a tin box with what money she had, to which she added the coins that Michael had given her that evening. Lastly, she scooped Liam into her arms. He was so much smaller than other boys his age, his weight barely affected her as he languidly wrapped his arms around her neck and legs around her waist. He murmured a little in his sleep, but he didn't stir.

With one last look at her disheveled father, Caitlin walked out the door with her brother. Dick Fitzgerald woke to find that, once again, his loved ones had left him.

Most people believed that Caitlin had taken her brother to Galway, where she had found work and made a better life for the two of them. Others thought they had managed to make their way to America. They all wished them the best of luck, saying that they were better off without their father dragging them down. Barney mourned for them, for the pretty girl with beautiful eyes and her quiet, sensitive brother.

Still others, fishermen like Dick who still held onto the old stories, said they would see the two of them from time to time, darting beneath the waves with their green-blue scales flashing in the sunlight. Sometimes they saw another figure with them, a woman with thick, dark hair and the same eyes. The three of them were often blamed when a net broke or a fish slipped a line.

THE BANSHEE OF COUNTY LIMERICK

FR. FIONN CASEY'S JOURNAL

On the road, Wednesday morning
November 11th, 1857

It is a beautiful day as I journey towards the western coast of our fair and leafy country. Winter has set into these parts, but the spirit of summer still holds in some of these places. I go now to County Limerick on the orders of the Archbishop Diarmuid Fitzgerald. There is some concern about a certain Father Flood in those parts, in regards to how he gets along with the locals and their customs. It seems there have been some altercations between that selfsame priest and his parishioners. His letters to the Archbishop have been cause for concern among the bishop and other church officials in Dublin.

In order to remain incognito, so to speak, I have chosen not to wear my cassock openly. If the people of the region have had altercations with a priest, they may not be forthcoming with another in the same uniform. People often see appearances before they see the man. It is in the humble garb of the Irish peasantry I proceed on this journey. I shall reach the village of C— by this afternoon, and I look forward to finding the truth of these matters for myself and for the Archbishop. It is through faithful and kind servants of God that we will win people over to his salvation. No man ever comes to true faith through cruelty or force; that is fear rather than true faith.

LATER

I have made it to the village and found lodging in the upper floors of the tavern. I met the local wise woman, Bronach MacGowan, who has been attending to a few sick folks around the village. She seems a kindly woman, nothing like the vile beast Fr. Flood has mentioned in his letters. She acts as both midwife and comfort to the sick in these parts, as they lack a doctor in the area. She also tells stories from time to time in the tavern to patrons both male and female. As the pub is the gathering place for locals, it is here I have chosen to stay to gain more insight into the conflict here.

MacGowan's stories are truly enchanting. This evening she told the tale of Finn MacCoul and his wife Oonagh outsmarting the legendary Cu Chulain, and she had everyone in fits of laughter, myself included. (Although, I may be biased on hearing a story of my namesake.) Some more zealous priests believe that such stories are awful ties to Ireland's pagan past, but I see no harm in a remembrance of cultural identity, provided the people accept the truth of Christ's Gospel. There are just as many stories about the defeat of the Devil among these people as there are of witches and changelings.

FR. FIONN CASEY'S JOURNAL

Village of C—, Friday evening
November 13th, 1857

I continue to investigate these matters between the locals and Fr. Flood. I saw the man today, although only from afar. He has a dour countenance about him as he goes among his people. His eyes cast a judgmental light and pride is reflected in his every movement. However, I will do my best not to judge the man on first appearances. I can only imagine my own countenance in the mornings after a restless night. I will continue to investigate and get to the truth of the matter, as at present my inferences based on fact rather than mere speculation.

A local man, one John O'Hara has fallen ill this past night. His daughter Essie reports that he was the picture of health yesterday, and yet today he can hardly move from his bed. Bronach MacGowan has been at his bedside all day, attending to his symptoms with various natural medicines and comforting Essie, who has no one in this world but her dear father. It was on his way from John O'Hara's cottage that I first saw the Fr. Flood. He came, like all good shepherds in Christ's fold, to attend to the man with what spiritual comforts and blessings he could dispose. According to a neighbor, one Gillian O'Shea, he was not happy to see Mistress MacGowan present with the man, saying such "pagan practices" that she uses are a lack of faith in God's mercy.

It seems that Fr. Flood's struggle with the people in this region is centered on Mistress MacGowan. I heard also from Mistress O'Shea that he had forbid her from attending Sunday Mass until she stop practicing her medicine. Apparently she recently led the annual Samhain festival, or Winter Solstice. That could be considered pagan in practice; however, I would have to have seen the festivities to determine if some restrictions would be necessary. We now celebrate All Hallow's Eve and All Saints' Day in place of Samhain, but many of the methods of celebration remain the same.

FR. FIONN CASEY'S JOURNAL

Village of C—, Sunday afternoon
November 15th, 1857

Unfortunately, John O'Hara passed away sometime in the night. Essie O'Hara and Mistress MacGowan were at his bedside through the whole ordeal, and although he was quite ill, I am told his passing into the next world was peaceful. Among the locals here (who still practice many of the old customs) the act of keening after a death is still prevalent. There are those in the eastern counties surrounding Dublin that argue that keening should be stopped in order for Ireland to enter into the modern world. In Dublin, when English and other foreign folk arrive, they are told by other visitors to attend an Irish funeral for its novelty. I think there are many who resent this, their grief being reduced to nothing more than a quaint and freakish roadside attraction.

If singing over the body of her father helps Essie O'Hara to grieve, then I say she should do so. There is nothing in Scripture to suggest the sinfulness of this. Even the Hebrews, when faced with death and destruction, would put on sackcloth and ashes and cry out to God in a similar manner. Even at Christ's execution and after, there is talk of weeping and wailing women. Christ himself only sought to comfort them, but did not condemn their grief. Keening is a strange sound to be sure, wild and unearthly. It causes a man to shudder in his skin at the sound of such feminine grief, speaking to the instinct of every man to shield woman from such heartache.

I myself was present outside the home of young Essie O'Hara at the time of her father's death. Given that there was already a priest there, I chose not to insert myself into the situation and instead observed. A window was open that allowed me a glimpse into the house. The keening which issued from this window was unlike anything I had ever heard — dissonant tones of both singing and weeping. Upon hearing it, I felt almost as if I would drop to the ground with sorrow myself. My very insides seemed to quiver and my throat constricted, making it difficult to speak without tears rising unbidden to my eyes. In it was all the grief and pain in the world.

Fr. Flood approached the house from the rectory, and I observed his change in attitude when the sound reached him. There was a pause in his step, and his every muscle appeared to contract and converge into angry lines. Before entering the house, he paused to take a breath, perhaps in an effort to calm himself. However, once he was on the other side of the door, I heard Fr. Flood admonishing the women soundly. His precise words I was unable to make out, but the anger in his tones was unmistakable. The women filed out of the house one at a time, leaving only Essie and Bronach MacGowan, who refused to move from Essie's side.

Fr. Flood spoke with Essie and Mistress MacGowan for some time, and I saw he and Essie bent in prayer, Mistress MacGowan standing behind Essie, head bent and hands on the poor girl's shaking shoulders. He left calmer than when he had entered, but I think I still saw a great deal of tension about his jaw. I think it is time that I reveal myself to Fr. Flood and speak to him on these matters.

FR. FIONN CASEY'S JOURNAL

Village of C—, Monday morning

November 16th, 1857

Yesterday after dinner time I approached Fr. Flood and told him of my own Holy Orders. He was eager to speak to a fellow priest after so long in isolation and readily accepted my explanation that I was simply touring the Western counties in order to give account of the faith to the Archbishop and other figures in Dublin. It is not entirely a lie, but it is not entirely truth either. I hope God will forgive me my small lie in order that I may do his holy work.

We spoke late into the night, and I think I have gleaned a more accurate account of Fr. Flood's character. He is a passionate priest, a man of clear faith, but to me he is overzealous. That is not entirely for me to decide or to judge; I would much rather the Archbishop or some wiser man come here to judge such things. (Perhaps I am not zealous enough in my own faith.) However, it was the Archbishop who sent me here to discover and to make a judgment on what I find, so I must trust in his faith in my abilities.

Fr. Flood spoke at great length about Bronach MacGowan and the "pagan rituals" that occur here in the county of Kerry. His vitriol against such practices is clear, but I do not think such anger helps steer the local people away from it. What interested me the most was his account of John O'Hara's passing and funeral, and I will relate it here as accurately as I can remember:

"On hearing of John O'Hara's passing, that is Essie's father, I made my way to his little cottage to do my duty in bringing him to the next life. He was a somewhat ignorant man, but good and devout in a broad sense, and it falls not to me to judge where he may be in his next life. It is only my duty to say those prayers that the Church has prescribed for such instances. I arrived at the house to a strange sight—there was that aforementioned MacGowan woman. She stood in a corner opposite the man's bed, her hand on the shoulder of the weeping Essie, rocking to and fro and singing a song of which the words were unclear. But it was a strange and eerie sort of song, and other women from the village joined in with her, rocking, beating their breasts, and tearing at their wild hair. The song tore at my very soul, wild and unearthly as it was, it truly did make me shudder, for it contained as much wailing as it did song. It was as if the voice of Death itself had made its way out of Hell and come into that house through the mouths of those women gathered there.

"As it befalls a man of God to see the souls of the dead into the next life, I silenced the women and sent them from that place. Grief should not take such a grotesque form. To my vexation, Essie insisted that the MacGowan woman stay with her, and as she is now alone in the world I chose not to insist. I said the necessary prayers over the body of poor John O'Hara and then sat with Essie to counsel her in her own prayers. She did wring my hands and weep, as men such as we are accustomed to in such times and from such as her. She said she kept the faith and knew her father was in Heaven with Christ and His angels, and I informed her that we cannot be certain of Heaven. Such presumption is sin.

"It was then that Essie O'Hara told me the most wondrous and monstrous thing. "I knew he were to die soon," she said. "I were warned of it, Father." Thinking her confused by her grief, I questioned her along this line. "It were the BANSHEE," she said, looking at me with eyes so red and swollen they

appeared stitched into her face. “She did appear last night, outside the window, Father.” She went on to describe a pale woman, with impossibly long black hair that had screeched at about three in the morning while she sat up by her father’s bedside. The house, being a humble cottage, contains no glass. There are only shutters separating the people from the wilderness, and Essie had thought to break her father’s fever by opening the cottage to the cool breeze. It was after three nearly sleepless nights caring for her father that Essie saw the apparition, and I told her it was her fearful and tired mind that conjured such a terrible visage.

“Despite all my gentle counseling and protestations, young Essie refused to deny her belief in the existence and power of the banshee creature. The MacGowan woman stood behind her the whole time I was there and added to the girl’s argument, saying that she herself had seen the weeping woman on many an occasion throughout her life. Even my telling them that such a belief is a sin against God the Father, who is Essie’s only father now, did nothing to dissuade their superstition. And what’s more, Essie insisted that the women I had sent off return. They did so, and they bathed John O’Hara’s body and led the funeral march to the graveyard. There was naught I could do to stop it, as all the people of the village and the surrounding countryside came, I swear that the crowd gathered in the procession numbered in the hundreds. Men carried John’s body atop a byre and lent their own deep tones to the keening of the women, and such an infernal noise I have not heard since the days of my childhood, when I was too young to understand its significance.”

All during this account, Fr. Flood held a face of perfect seriousness, a cup of tea cradled in his hands as the orange glow of the fire cast moving shadows across the room. As I guessed at my first sight of Fr. Flood, I find his pride clear in his speech, as well as a certain animosity toward the feminine sex. I will continue to observe and speak with him in order to determine the accuracy of my conclusions to this point. For now, I must go about my business. Now that I am trusted amongst the people, I have revealed myself as a priest, especially now, as more people have fallen ill and they are in need of spiritual comfort.

FR. FIONN CASEY’S JOURNAL
Village of C—, Friday night
November 27th, 1857

Five more have died since John O’Hara, and more are struck with the same illness. Fears among the people have increased, as Fr. Flood has preached these deaths as God’s judgment on the local peasantry for their lack of faith. He continues to forbid keening and other old practices, and I find more and more people coming to me for spiritual guidance and advice. Not wanting to directly contradict their own spiritual leader, I am careful with

my counsel, saying only that they must pray and do good works as best they can. However, Fr. Flood's fearmongering disturbs me greatly.

A growing faction of women surrounding Bronach MacGowan are beginning to pull away from Fr. Flood and the Church, a fact which disturbs me greatly. They refuse to submit to the man, saying that they do not see the light of God in him. I believe their faith and concerns are genuine, but the fact that they no longer attend Mass and receive the Eucharist troubles me. I am told that they gather together in Mistress MacGowan's home on Sunday to pray the Rosary and whoever reads well enough recites the Scripture for those present. (Mistress Gillian O'Shea continues to be a fount of information, as she tends toward gossip.)

I have written to the Archbishop of my concerns here, and I must hope and pray to God that he can find a peaceful and holy solution to these troubles.

FR. FIONN CASEY'S JOURNAL

Village of C—, Saturday evening

November 28th, 1857

I have had the most disturbing encounter with Fr. Flood this day. He has confided in me that since John O'Hara's death, he has heard the cries of a woman in the distance. His obsession with the practices of the bereaved appears to be driving his already overzealous nature into a state of hysteria. Not that he is not sane; the man is logical and devout as he ever was, but he turns more and more to anger as a way of being. I'm sure he sees God's righteousness in his anger, but I only see something that will drive an even greater wedge between him and his congregation.

Fr. Flood says that more people flock to the Church on weekdays, and that is true enough, but it is in utter despair that they come. They sit in that cold, dank building and weep till there are no more tears to give, then they sit in dazed silence for hours on end. It is good that these pitiful souls come to God in their time of sadness, but I believe Fr. Flood encourages them to wallow in such sadness rather than also looking for the good in daily living again. And as more grow ill, kitchen gardens and livestock are neglected and homes become more and more disordered.

What's more, Fr. Flood has reported a strange occurrence to me this evening, the funeral cries of a woman that seem to follow him ere he goes. He says that at first he thought it was one of the locals attempting to taunt him with the very thing he strictly forbade, but now he reports otherwise. Tonight I sat with him in the rectory and had supper at his table, and he related to me the most marvelous story. Had it come from any other I dare not believe it, but Fr. Flood is a man grounded in the concrete and present. He sat next to the thrifty fire in his worn chair and related to me the story of his evening walks, which I

have recorded here to the best of my memory, for so strange a telling should be in the first-hand:

“Just last night I was out walking. I had been unable to sleep and thought the activity may quiet my mind, or at the very least allow me to wrestle with my thoughts and be done with them. I checked the village for signs of pagan practices, as it is my wont to do at these times, then I made my way outside of the village. It was there, on the worn dirt path to the east of the village, that I once again heard the crying and wailing coming from the distance. Only this time, it seemed closer, its sound more palpable on the air. I thought at last to discover the culprit, for I have long suspected the MacGowan woman or one of her cohort, so I ran towards the sound. Surely, thought I, this will be the moment I squash this out for good.

“I thought to find the woman just beyond the next grassy hillock, and I hitched up my cassock in order to move all the faster. Upon cresting the hill, however, I found nothing. No one to speak of, and during my mad dash the eerie howling had ceased. The only thing to be seen was a knotted and twisted hawthorn tree, bent by wind and age. The breeze whined through its branches in such a way as to almost convince me of its guilt. But I know what I heard. It is surely some foul peasant woman, the Devil’s instrument, coming to taunt me, to terrify me into submission with his foul works.”

As I said, it is a strange tale, but Fr. Flood’s face spoke nothing of madness or jest. He was entirely calm in his telling. I have visited the afflicted in asylums through the course of my work, and there is a certain hysteria to their madness, a look in their eye that is desperate to be believed, to no longer be alone in their delusion. Fr. Flood’s eye had none of this look; he was simply relating the story of his evening as it happened. I find it difficult to believe that a woman in this parish would be wandering the wilderness at night simply in an effort to taunt Fr. Flood. My grandmother would have said the woman was actually a banshee and Fr. Flood’s death was imminent, but such stories cannot be true.

Perhaps it was a grieving woman unable to sleep on such a night when so many loved ones have been lost. I shall find out the truth of it tomorrow.

FR. FIONN CASEY’S JOURNAL
Village of C—, Late Tuesday
December 1st, 1857

I have questioned the women of the village about anyone wandering around at nights. I am certain that others would know of it, such is the closeness and watchfulness of all small villages through the country. All parties insisted that there is nothing to report, and I

am confident that they are entirely honest with me. What am I to make of Fr. Flood's reports of a wailing woman?

Were I a superstitious man, I would say that he is being tormented by a banshee, perhaps to warn him that his own demise is near, or to drive him mad after his prohibition against keening. As an educated man, however, I want to say that Fr. Flood is going mad. His demeanor is not that of a disturbed person though, and I am at a loss as to what to think. Fr. Flood told me this evening that he hears it every night, and it seems to grow closer to him with each death in the village.

I will continue to pray and hope for better things to come. I wrote to the archbishop, telling him of the sickness and troubles here. I have said very little about Fr. Flood's midnight revelations. I do not want to alarm the archbishop until I know more.

FR. FIONN CASEY'S JOURNAL

Village of C—, Wednesday morning

December 23rd, 1857

It has been weeks since I've written, and I am much distressed. The deaths in the village and surrounding county have increased with each passing day, with no notion of it letting up. The famine was nearly a decade ago, but it still has its hold on the people of this community. While the potato blight ended, many of the elder members of the community (those who did not emigrate to America) are still quite poor and their health was greatly affected. I think this weakness in their constitution has given this illness a greater foothold than it would have had otherwise.

Even more distressing is my revelations about Fr. Flood and the nightly wailing. Lately I have moved into the rectory, not wanting to prevail upon the tavern owners any longer, for they have sickness in their family. Their daughter became sick last week, but being in possession of a healthy disposition, she is making a recovery, thank God. Being in closer contact with Fr. Flood has helped me make serious strides towards the truth.

His claims of a wailing woman are true. I have heard it myself. At first, I thought that in the midst of all this despair that I had succumbed to his madness. However, I have heard the woman in the night, wailing and crying a grief like nothing I have ever heard in my life. It is enough to drive one to the edge of madness, but it is real. I do not hear this anguished cry so often as Fr. Flood does, only every few nights when I am up late into the night in prayer. But Fr. Flood hears it nearly every night now. He rarely sleeps the night through.

Having mounted my own search for this grieving personage, I am distressed to say I have found nothing. I would not believe that such a sound existed, I would think myself driven

mad by death if it weren't for Fr. Flood hearing it as well. I fear for his wellbeing in the midst of this torment. Tonight I will search the village and the surrounding countryside for this voice. I begin to think that he is wrestling with the Devil for his very soul.

FR. FIONN CASEY'S JOURNAL

Village of C—, Monday afternoon

December 28th, 1857

Last night I heard the wailing once again, and I immediately went outdoors to investigate. I had left some clothes and shoes handy so I could move quickly out of bed. Fr. Flood was whimpering in his own room. I left, determined to help him in his time of need and to discover the woman who has tormented him so. Leaving the rectory, I stomped around through the little hills and trees trying to follow the voice, but the wind whipped all sounds into a frenzy, and I could not determine the source of the noise. The wailing and screaming seemed to come from a dozen places at times, and I nearly wept for the frustration and shared grief.

I have spoken with Mistress MacGowan about the wailing woman, and she maintains that it is a banshee at work. Her belief in the fairy woman's existence is firm. Mistress MacGowan insists that if the people of the village were allowed to grieve in the traditional ways, the wailing would cease and Fr. Flood would be freed of his torment. I am reluctant to share this opinion with him, as he has still held firm that keening is the work of pagan devilry. I admire his faith and perseverance, even if I sometimes think it misguided. I do not think I would have held out so long as he has.

I hope that my missives have reached the archbishops, but it takes a great deal of time to communicate with people across the country in Dublin. I wish to remain here as long as these people have need of me and the archbishop asks it of me, but I do not know how much longer I can endure this.

FR. FIONN CASEY'S JOURNAL

Village of C—, Friday morning

January 16th, 1858

I am saddened to say that sweet Essie O'Hara has died. Fr. Flood will perform her funeral this afternoon. She was much loved by the people of the village. Even after her father's death, she continued to minister to the ill and miserable in the parish, and her smiling face helped many on their way to either recovery or a peaceful end. I am also much affected by her passing, as she was one of the most welcoming when I came here to the west. My faith is somewhat shaken by the many deaths and the eldritch voice I hear some nights, but it is Essie's death that makes me most angry with God. If I were talking with a bereaved parishioner, I would tell them that she is happier at God's side, but the

hollowness of that sentiment is clear to me now. I am happy that she is with God, but it strikes to my very heart that such a beautiful soul is no longer doing much-needed good upon this earth.

I find I am too much aggrieved to write more at the moment.

LATER,

How can I report what I have seen this day? It is as if the Devil himself has visited me on this most melancholy of occasions. It was at dear Essie O'Hara's funeral. All those who were able gathered for the sad ceremony. Even some of the ill who were well enough attended at a distance, such was her influence in the village. Mistress MacGowan attended the funeral as well, although she stayed outside the cemetery, not wanting to cause a scene with Fr. Flood.

Fr. Flood performed the ceremony, saying prayers and giving a lovely homily on the goodness displayed by such a beautiful soul. He is much changed since I first came here: he is so thin it is miraculous that he is able to stand, his cassock hanging on his frame and his face nearly reduced to bones. He looks like the figure of Death himself, due to so many sleepless nights at prayer. I fear for him.

As dear Essie was being lowered into the ground, Fr. Flood (who stood across from me) looked past me, his countenance an expression of pure horror. I turned to see what he beheld and found myself similarly aghast. How to describe such a figure? First I noticed her clothing, green and gray as it was, of an older fashion than the people in these parts wear, like something out of a storybook. But that was not the strangest thing. It took moments for me to notice, but her clothing **MOVED**. This would seem inconsequential, except for the deathly stillness of the evening. And her hair, longer than any I have ever seen and kept loose. It looked as if she had been tearing it from her scalp. The woman was pale, as pale as the corpses that lay in the earth awaiting burial, and her eyes. Her horrid eyes. They were like Essie's had been after her father's passing, but far more haunting, for Essie's grief was ordinary. These eyes, blue and cold as they were, red from infinite weeping. With the arm that was not gripping an ancient hawthorn tree, she reached out towards me and let out a cry so unearthly that I broke out into a cold sweat.

It is difficult for me to justify this phantasm with my previous views of reality. Once again, I find a strange sort of comfort that others have spoken of this figure as well, particularly Fr. Flood and Bronach MacGowan, both of whom are fair-minded and sober individuals. I think I shall be up late in prayer this night.

FR. FIONN CASEY'S JOURNAL

Village of C—, Monday morning

January 25th, 1858

My fear for Fr. Flood's wellbeing grows. Since poor Essie's funeral, he has seen that ghostly apparition at all hours of the day and night. His already thin countenance begins to turn gray and wan. Yesterday evening at dinner, he told me of his experience this last week:

"I see her everywhere I go. No one else makes mention of her, but she is there —when I turn a corner, when I glance out the window, even once when I glimpsed my own reflection in a mirror, she was in the room behind me. I turned to find that she was gone. Often she screams, a sound that turns the very blood to ice in my veins, but just as often she simply glares at me, and I fear the fires of Hell itself burn in her eyes."

He barely ate his modest meal as he told me these things, despite my protests. I have written the archbishop once again, but I begin to suspect that my letters have not reached him. It is not like him to be unresponsive to such calamity.

There is talk among the people of the village of celebrating Imbolc in the coming days. They begin to believe that their prayers to Christ are being ignored and that the sickness and hunger this winter has all been due to their abandonment of the old ways. Fr. Flood is greatly distressed at this as well, and despite his apparent weakness, he continues to preach zealously against such rituals and that they should instead celebrate the feast of St. Brigid. He ever speaks of "that woman" and I do not know whether he is referring to the wailing apparition or to Mistress MacGowan, who continues to be a pillar of the community. I heard him muttering under his breath some days ago about "that woman" again, and it took me a moment to realize that he was at prayer.

He ended his prayer with words that still chill me to my marrow: "I fear she will be my death." I cannot deny that there is some truth to this. It feels more like a prediction than a fear.

FR. FIONN CASEY'S JOURNAL

Village of C—, Tuesday morning

February 2nd, 1858

I have been awake all night. The terrors of this small community may be too much for me at this point. I do not know if I will ever recover from the things I have seen, and I pray that things will get better for the poor people of this parish.

I have found a letter Fr. Flood was writing yesterday morning. It is difficult to read, as his script is shaky and scattered. His distressed frame of mind is clear in this text. The letter

is addressed to the archbishop and leaves off suddenly. I have read and recorded it to the best of my ability here:

“The screaming woman is now everywhere. She trails me endlessly, and her voice forever rings in my ears, even when she is still. I sleep now in fits, only what sleep is necessary to keep my heart beating. I see her figure always before me, even when I close my eyes. My prayers have come to no avail, and the people gathered this past midnight to celebrate their harlot goddess Brigid. They made beds in her honor and set birch wands next to them for her imaginary use. Surely this harlot was once a demon sent by the Devil to trick the people of this island from the worship of the one, true God.

“They say the sickness has begun to die down, and some even have recovered where before there were none that saw the third sunrise since falling ill. The MacGowan woman leads their celebrations, her hair loose around her waist like the young girl she will never be again.

“I cannot do more to stop them. I am confined to my quarters. I pray at all hours that the wailing woman will leave me in peace. Archbishop, I AM AFRAID I CANNOT GO ON. My faith is failing me. I am unworthy of God’s mercy, and I begin to doubt it as she continues to hinder my sleep.”

Given what I have discovered this dark night, Fr. Flood’s words strike at the core of my very soul. I woke in the night, hearing a great banging noise. I rose and dressed quickly, thinking that perhaps it was the wailing woman, finally come into the rectory. I thought to find her downstairs tearing our few possessions with a fury. Instead, I saw that the front door was ajar and moved by a cold wind.

I checked Fr. Flood’s room to find it in a state of disarray. The window was thrown open, his sheets were torn from his bed, and books and pages lay everywhere, whether by the power of the wind or Fr. Flood’s distress, I do not know. I am amazed that I did not hear his distress, perhaps I have grown used to it. (What a terrible thing to become accustomed to.)

Yesterday there was a celebration for Imbolc, the ancient festival of the coming of spring and the fertility goddess Brigid. Now, the Catholic Church has christened it as the feast day of St. Brigid, a nun who I have doubts was real. Most of the villagers attended the celebrations rather than going to Mass and making crosses. They think by abandoning these old ways, they have brought the many deaths upon themselves. Fr. Flood was greatly distressed at this, so I believe he wandered the night to ponder what to do next.

However, this morning, he has not returned. We always say Prime together and have breakfast before setting out to do our work. I know not why I am so worried by this, but a

foreboding comes from my very bones. A search of Fr. Flood's room has revealed this letter, and my dread grows. I will search for him today. I pray I will find a good explanation for his absence.

FR. FIONN CASEY'S JOURNAL

Village of C—, Thursday afternoon

February 4th, 1858

There is dreadful news for me to report: Fr. Flood is dead. I searched for him all Tuesday before asking the villagers for assistance in the afternoon. They know the country better than I, and my growing distress made it all the more difficult for me to mount an effective search. A couple dozen men were gathered to comb the countryside, and he was finally found early this morning.

The day is painfully at odds with the events and my own utter dejection. Spring tickles the senses as the sun casts a cheerful, blue light, and the villagers tend to their sheep in preparation for new lambs. And yet, there is such darkness here. Gillian O'Shea's husband, Michael, fetched me from the Church where I was at prayer. Being of little help to the search efforts, I determined that I would be most useful there. It was well before Terce, and the sun was barely beginning to make an appearance on the eastern horizon. I followed him to the outskirts of the village, and we came to a small valley, hidden amidst the growth of ancient trees. The roots of the trees made a raised ring, almost like a low wall, around a large tree trunk in the center. On this tree trunk, barely higher than my knee, there are dozens of trinkets: ribbons, coins, even a few crusts of bread. Michael O'Shea told me after that it was an ancient mound, those hills that dot the landscapes of Ireland that used to house the people of this green country. They were built as a protective place to retreat at night, both from invaders and the unknown spirits that haunted the imaginations of the people in those days. Now they serve as a reminder of those early days, and folks go there both to gawk and to pay respects.

In this ancient ring, with its trees beginning to bud and come to life with spring, we found Fr. Flood. What a sight to behold. It will haunt me for the rest of my days. His feet were bare. It seemed he had walked many miles over cruel ground, for they were bloody and torn. His cassock was also in such a state, muddy and ripped at the knees and elbows, as if he had fallen several times. I could not help but be reminded of the Christ's three falls on the way to his death on the Holy Cross. As I have reported earlier, Fr. Flood had grown thin in his last days. His bony hands were raised as if to protect his face.

Oh, his horrid face. I hope never again to see such a visage. Poor Fr. Flood's mouth was open as if in a scream. The man who cares for the bodies before burial, having gained much practice in recent days, said that he nearly had to break Fr. Flood's jaw to close it. He must have been in that state the whole time we were searching. More than that, his

eyes were gone, as if pecked out by crows, leaving nothing but bloody tracks down his tear-sodden cheeks. What can he have seen in his final minutes to cause such an expression of utter horror?

Further examination of his body unearthed no evidence. Beyond his appearance and posture, there was nothing to suggest a struggle, no evidence of a blow that brought about his demise. We have concluded that his heart simply gave out. I am to conduct his funeral this afternoon.

FR. FIONN CASEY'S JOURNAL

On the road to Dublin, Monday morning

February 8th, 1858

I am now staying in a rectory on the way back to Dublin. I am to report the events of these last months, of the sickness and deaths, especially the death of Fr. Flood. How am I to report what has occurred here. I cannot quite fathom it myself. I have slept little since seeing the body of Fr. Flood. Few came to his funeral service, and I found myself so distraught that I stumbled over some of the prayers.

I do not know if I will ever fully understand what happened to me and to the inhabitants of C—, what foul creature haunted the night with its screaming and led to the death of one of my brethren. I had held the firm belief that such creatures as the banshee do not exist, but now I am naturally uncertain. How can such as that exist alongside our Lord, and how is it that I have never seen such things nearer to Dublin? Perhaps they have been driven out. The priests have preached a new faith, and so they have taken to the western reaches of this country as a place of refuge.

Archbishop Fitzgerald has asked me to report to him and the other bishops in the region, but what can I say to them? I have some fear that they will send me to an asylum when they hear my report. I must have courage to go on. I will speak the truth as I know it and trust them to judge what to do. All I know for certain is that I will never be the man I was a few short months ago.

THE IN-BETWEENS

“This is not my child, Gran,” Niamh whispered. Her grandmother, with her thistle-down hair continued to stare at her puzzle. Niamh noted that it was a picture of Kilkenny Castle before she continued. “It’s mad, I know,” she looked down at the child in her arms, “but this is not Ciaran. I know my child, and this can’t be him. I can’t tell anyone but you, Gran. The doctors would think I’d gone nuts.”

Niamh’s grandmother didn’t look up. Since being diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, she had been slipping deeper and deeper into a haze. She had been living in a home for just over a year. Niamh sighed: “Gran, will you please look at me? I don’t know what to do.”

No response. Needing to speak to someone, even if they weren’t listening, Niamh told her grandmother of the night things had changed. She had been smoking a cigarette on the balcony of her vile apartment building.

Watching the minuscule green space three floors below, Niamh was surprised to see a slender fox in the courtyard. There was no one else to be seen; in fact, it was a remarkably quiet night in Belfast. It must have sensed her presence, because the fox turned to look directly at her, its amber eyes cunning. Amazed, Niamh kept as still as possible, not wanting to frighten the mysterious creature.

Ciaran had been crying, that’s what had woken her, and Niamh had fed him from the bottle and settled him down to sleep again. She still couldn’t convince him to breastfeed, and her breasts ached with the milk her child refused to eat. She had the baby monitor in her back pocket and could hear him snuffling in his crib, no longer hungry but not yet asleep. The fox’s ears pricked at a loud thump from a speaker, and Niamh had to resist the urge to call him back when he turned and loped away. Before disappearing, the fox turned back, and Niamh could have sworn it winked at her. A trick of the light and three weeks without sleep, Niamh thought.

Putting out her cigarette on the railing and flicking the butt into the courtyard, Niamh returned to her apartment. Her grandmother’s old furniture, floral and worn, looked out of place in the tiny apartment, and Niamh couldn’t help but compare it to the cottage her grandmother had raised her in. She went to bed with a cursory glance at the crib to ensure Ciaran was well.

The next morning, Niamh woke later than usual. Ciaran was silent in his crib, and the panic in Niamh’s chest only abated when she lurched out of bed to check on him. Little Ciaran was there in his crib, silently gazing up at her with large, hazel eyes. She picked him up and settled on the couch to feed him, but she couldn’t get comfortable. Something about his weight in her arms was different, and he wasn’t fussing in his usual way. He just looked at her with an almost unnatural concentration. Niamh lifted her shirt, and to her surprise, Ciaran latched on immediately. However, he wouldn’t eat. Niamh offered him the bottle, and he refused formula as well.

Why is he so calm? she wondered, feeling Ciaran’s forehead and neck. He was cool to the touch, where he was usually so warm he made her sweat where she held him. He looked alright, but he wasn’t his usual self. *Maybe he’ll eat later.*

Three days had passed, and Ciaran had not eaten a drop of either breast milk or formula. Niamh had taken him to the doctor, who had remarked that his temperature was unusually low, but otherwise he appeared healthy. “A little underweight, but that’s quite normal at this stage,” the doctor had said. “Nothing to worry about.”

Despite his reassurances, Niamh had become convinced that this was not her child. The thing she held in her arms now was just bizarre, with its eerie silence, cool skin, and complete lack of appetite. She had only been a mother for a month, but Niamh knew her child, felt the pull of Ciaran’s existence from across a room. She felt nothing for this “thing”.

“I’m mad, aren’t I, Gran?” Niamh now said to her grandmother, whose silence was matched only by the creature in her lap.

A male nurse approached with a tray of cups. “It’s time for your medicine, Siofra,” he said melodically. Niamh couldn’t help but notice how handsome he was, with a thatch of thick, red hair and a small, glinting hoop in his left ear. As he handed Siofra her pills, Niamh noticed a thick, gold ring on his right thumb with a triple spiral engraved in it. Despite his good looks, the man was unusually thin.

Waiting till he had moved onto the next patient, Niamh looked at her grandmother. “Please talk to me,” she said. “I have no idea what I’m doing. I’m too young for all this, and I’m alone since I brought you here.” She looked down at not-Ciaran in her lap, for that was how she had come to think of it. It had grown thinner in the past three days, but despite that it still didn’t make a sound, and it wouldn’t eat. When she glimpsed the child out of the corner of her eye, Niamh swore it was nothing more than a bundle of sticks, fashioned like a doll with blue stones for eyes.

“It’s a changeling child,” Niamh was shocked to hear these words from her grandmother’s mouth, her voice cracked with disuse.

“What?” Niamh was still processing that her grandmother was no longer staring vacantly at the puzzle in front of her, but rather was studying the child carefully.

“This is a faerie child.” Siofra continued, “How long has Ciaran been gone?”

Niamh remained in awed silence till Siofra glared up at her. It was the familiar look, one she had employed all Niamh’s life that said “get on with it”.

“Three days,” Niamh replied.

“Then you don’t have much time,” mused Siofra. “When a child is taken, you have seven days to retrieve it, or it will remain in The Otherworld forever.”

“The Otherworld?”

Siofra’s tone sharpened: “Don’t you remember any of the stories I told you, girl? I told you all about the faeries and their ways.” She nodded toward not-Ciaran in Niamh’s lap.

“I thought those were just stories,” Niamh stuttered.

“Nonsense! I’d not waste my time on such things if they weren’t true. I’m not so frivolous as that.”

Niamh looked around to make sure no one was listening to their conversation.

“But what do I do?”

“Find a door. Go through it,” Siofra’s tone was matter-of-fact.

“What door? How do I find it?”

Siofra cast a withering look at her granddaughter. “How am I supposed to know?” she replied. “I can’t tell you everything.” She waved the redheaded nurse back over to her. “I need to rest,” she told him.

“But, Gran, wait-” Niamh was cut off with a backward wave as the nurse wheeled her grandmother away to her room, winking at her as he left.

Changeling... Otherworld... Find a door. Niamh’s thoughts raced as she sat on the crowded bus. Her mind rebelled at the idea that the child in her arms was actually a mythical creature, but she couldn’t shake the deep certainty that her grandmother’s words were the truth. That certainty settled in her stomach like a stone: *Four more days*. That’s all the time she had to find her son or lose him forever. If Siofra’s stories were correct, the thing in her arms would quietly wither away to nothing, and there was little she could do to stop it.

Upon returning to her flat and depositing not-Ciaran in the crib, Niamh grabbed the baby monitor and sat on the balcony where she knew she could get some unsuspecting neighbor’s internet signal. She searched “changeling” and sat for nearly two hours, finding nothing. There were too many variables and uncertainties, not to mention that there was no reliable source of information. In all that time, there was not a single sound from the baby monitor sitting on the cold concrete next to her.

With temples pounding, Niamh closed her duct-taped laptop and returned to her flat, even less sure about how to find a door than she had been before. She couldn’t stop shivering from being out in the December cold for so long. There was no map, no plan that could help her through this. None of it made any sense. Niamh checked the crib, and not-Ciaran was there, staring up at her from too-big eyes that were not quite the hazel of her own son’s.

Frustrated, she returned to the balcony for a cigarette, shoving the baby monitor in her jacket pocket out of habit but knowing she wouldn’t need it. “Find a door,” she muttered to herself. “How the fuck do I do that, Gran? You never thought to tell me that part of the story.” A red streak in the courtyard reminded Niamh of the fox she had seen earlier in the week.

“You’re missing the obvious,” a voice to her left startled her out of her reverie, and Niamh dropped her cigarette from her hand. A tall, thin man sat on the balcony just next to her as if he’d been there the whole time. It was the nurse who had been at her grandmother’s home. He still wore the gold ring on his thumb and the hoop in his left ear, but instead of scrubs he wore jeans, a black leather jacket, and a t-shirt emblazoned with the words: “IMAGINATION IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN KNOWLEDGE.” He wore the same smirk as before.

“Where the hell did you come from?” Niamh said. “Did you follow me here?”

The man shrugged and stood up. He was quite tall, and thinner than Niamh had imagined. “I didn’t need to follow you,” he said. “I simply thought to find you, and here you are. Maybe it’s you that’s followed me.”

“What do you want?” Niamh asked, trying to surreptitiously move closer to her door, hoping to lock him out or ring the guard.

“What I want is immaterial,” the man said, sidling up against her door smooth as a cat. “I’m here because of what you want. I’m going to solve your little problem. I’m going to tell you where the door is.”

Niamh’s heart seemed to stop. *Find a door. Go through it.* “How do you know about that?”

“I know a great many things, pet, and your little mind can’t handle a teaspoon of it,” the man said. Niamh started to protest, but he cut her off. “Don’t waste time arguing with me. You have less than four days to get your wee one back safe and sound.”

Niamh fought down her frustration and desperation. She fought the instinct not to trust this man, because there was something about him that was decidedly off, something that reminded her a great deal of the child in the crib behind the door of her flat. “How is it you think you can help me?” asked Niamh as calmly as she could.

The man sighed and stretched before crossing his arms in front of his chest. “This is an interesting time of year,” he mused, leaning against the doorframe and balanced on one foot with the ease of an acrobat. “So many changes, so much transition. An in-between, you could say.”

“Can we please get to the point,” Niamh said.

“Ah, yes,” the man stopped her with a finger to her lips. “Humanity, so impatient, but I suppose things look very different for you when time is constantly running shorter.” Niamh resisted the urge to hit him. “I want to help you, but as I said, you’re missing the obvious.”

“What am I missing?”

“You’re looking for a door to an ancient world,” the man widened his eyes as if this would unlock the whole mystery. Niamh said nothing. Sighing condescension, he continued: “You’re looking for a door to an ancient world, so it stands to reason that the door will be...”

“Ancient,” Niamh replied.

“I knew you’d get there eventually.”

Niamh made a rude gesture at the man before asking, “What sort of ancient door am I looking for?” She thought of the forums she’d read. “In the stories, it’s usually a fairy ring of some kind, mushrooms or stones, even seaside caves.”

“Betwixt the sea and sea strand,” he said in a singsong voice. “Those places are around, to be sure. Those doors rarely lead you somewhere you want to go.”

“Faeries aren’t exactly reliable in the stories,” retorted Niamh. “They’re all different. The doors change, the rules aren’t consistent.”

“But there is some consistency to it!” the man said. “You can find the Otherworld in the in-between places when day fades into night, when winter melts into spring, places where paths converge. Those are the places where a veil is parted and people can go into the world of Faerie.”

Niamh thought for a moment. “Where winter melts into summer...” she repeated to herself. “It’s almost Winter Solstice, and lots of people will be going to Newgrange.”

The man’s grin widened to an unnatural degree. “People from all over the world will be there. Paths converging to a single point, the shortest day of the year as the light changes.”

“Newgrange is thousands of years old,” Niamh said. “And it’s a portal tomb as well. Winter Solstice is in three days. I could take a bus there first thing.” Niamh felt a flicker of hope. She had a plan, a way forward. She had to switch not-Ciaran with Ciaran. It was always that way in the stories. But then her heart fell.

“People have been planning to go to Newgrange for the solstice for months. There’s no way I could get in at the last minute.”

The redheaded man reached out a hand and lifted Niamh’s chin till she was looking in his eyes, which were a strange orange color. “You have to try,” he said solemnly before he turned to the stairway. “I’ll help.” He stopped and shrugged, “Well, I’ll help a bit.”

“How do I get hold of you?” Niamh called after him. “And what’s your name, by the way?”

“Call me Robin,” he said without turning before disappearing down the stairs.

Didn’t answer my first question, Niamh thought as she opened her door. Before it shut behind her, she thought she saw a fox dart through the courtyard and out of sight.

The next morning, Niamh took not-Ciaran to the library to do more research.

“How to get through a faerie door” yielded few real results on the internet, so she decided to book passage to Newgrange. Bus Eirean had a route that went there, and she would have to take another bus from the visitor center. There were no tickets currently available, but Niamh could walk if she had to.

There were thousands of people there from all over the world. Niamh watched videos of the solstice and the light crossing the chamber. Only a few people were actually allowed in the chamber for the solstice, and Niamh was sure that she had to be at the back of the chamber at the precise moment that the light hit it. That would be a challenge—people going into the chamber had entered a drawing months ago, and videos of the site showed many security guards checking their tickets and keeping out anyone else. She had to find a way. The life of her child depended on it.

Reaching the door was one thing, but how was she to get through it. As the internet had given her nothing, Niamh found the folklore section in the stacks. Not-Ciaran had remained quiet against her chest the entire time, looking up at her with the concentration of a much older person rather than looking around the room or sleeping as an ordinary infant would.

She found a few books by Irish poets, Yeats and Crofton and some others. There were some stories about changelings in Yeats as well as stories of people being rescued from the fairies. Most of it involved some items to trade, such as an herb from next to a

hawthorn tree or a black knife. The rest involved holding onto the person no matter what happened.

Niamh made a list of some of the things that worked in the stories. She'd find them all if she had to. Something had to work. Pulling a book from the stacks, Niamh was startled by a pair of orange eyes looking at her from the other side of the shelf. "Finding much?" Robin asked leisurely.

"Nothing reliable," Niamh answered haughtily.

Robin sidled from the other side of the shelf. He had bleached a streak of his red hair white. "But watching you work through it is certainly fun."

Niamh pursed her lips and took a slow breath. "What part of this is fun?" she hissed. "My child is gone."

Robin made no move to calm her. His smirk simply grew.

Niamh raked her hands back through her blonde hair and rocked not-Ciaran a bit out of habit. Her eyes were stinging and her throat was full. It all seemed so hopeless.

"I ought to be off, my pet," Robin said, pushing himself from where he leaned against the shelf. A small, red volume fell to the floor. "Oops," he said carelessly and made no move to pick it up, disappearing behind a display of autobiographies.

Niamh sighed and retrieved the book he had dropped, bending carefully around not-Ciaran in the sling. There was no sticker on the spine. It was an old volume, much older than anything in this part of the library. Opening the cover, there was a spidery handwriting reading: *Use it wisely. - R.*

Flipping the page, Niamh almost gasped at the title: *The Definitive Guide to Faeries and Faerieland.*

Two days later, Niamh had gathered all the items she thought might help her. It had taken a good deal of time, asking, and walking to find a hawthorn tree in the center of Belfast, but she had done it, and next to the tree were a few sprigs of wild mint. A trip to the pawn shop and a few euro had gotten her a black-handled knife. It was dull and chipped, but it was the best she could do. An elderly neighbor had consented to lend Niamh a partially-used wax taper, despite her confusion at Niamh needing it in the first place.

She now sat on the bus toward Newgrange, faerie child quiet in her lap and a backpack next to her.

Not-Ciaran snuffled against her chest as if he were hungry, but Niamh knew by now she could not get him to eat. He was growing thinner, and she did what she could to hide this from the people around her. It would be difficult to explain the clearly starving child in her arms, but the best thing for it was to return it to its faerie mother. An affection for the eldritch child had grown over the past few days, and Niamh kissed the top of its head. It was likely missing its own mother after all.

Her anxiety settled low in her stomach as she came closer and closer to Newgrange. What if this was all wrong?

Traffic grew more condensed as she got closer to Newgrange, for all the people were gathering for the sunrise on the shortest day of the year. Niamh scrubbed the sleep

from her eyes and stretched a bit in an attempt to wake herself up. She needed to be alert. Sunrise was going to be at 8:58, and the light would only reach the end of the tomb for mere seconds. She had to be there at precisely the moment when the light hit the rear of the chamber. That she knew in her bones.

Niamh stumbled off the bus at Bru na Boinne Visitor Center to be greeted by a large crowd of people waiting to reach the ancient site. *How the hell am I supposed to get a bus?* she wondered. People of all sorts were crowded next to the bus station, tourists with their iPads and tennis shoes, hippies in their loose clothing and dread locks, historians and scientists with their notes and their measuring instruments. It was nearly seven o'clock.

Struggling toward the ticket booth with her arms wrapped protectively around not-Ciaran, Niamh sent a silent prayer to whatever god would listen. She was greeted at the booth by a frazzled clerk with blue hair and purple lipstick, his eyes red with exhaustion. "I need a ticket," Niamh said.

Exasperated and making no effort to hide it, he told her: "There's no tickets left, miss. You should have booked it weeks ago."

Niamh bit her lip. "Please," the desperation was clear in her tone. "You don't understand what's at stake for me."

"Lot's of people are trying to get there, love," he replied, pulling his black sweater closer around his shoulders against the cold. "There's nothing I can do for you."

Someone tapped her on the shoulder. "Excuse me, miss," an American accent made Niamh turn around to see a woman in her fifties wearing a yellow rain jacket and track pants. "We have an extra ticket you're welcome to. My grandson was supposed to come, but he decided to sleep in instead. He's still got some jet lag from the flight over here."

"And he's lazy," grumbled the man who must be her husband.

"Really?" Niamh said. "I can pay you for it," she pulled the cash from her pocket. "How much do you want?"

The woman shook her head. "Don't worry about it, sweetheart," she said. "We got it as part of a package. You seem like you need it." She handed Niamh the ticket, and Niamh thanked her profusely before walking toward the bus stop.

At 7:38 Niamh got off the bus at Newgrange. She had never been there before, and the round stone hill was quite a sight, rising from the ground as a testament of the ancients, white stones with a grassy top, triskels carved all over and standing stones all around. It faced the east, waiting in earnest for the sun it had been greeting for over five thousand years. People chatted or slept on the ground, beat bodhrans and danced, basking in the spiritual energy of generations.

"You made it after all then." Niamh was not surprised to see Robin sitting atop a large stone that had been unoccupied moments before. "I worried you wouldn't be able to catch a bus. Fortunate that the American was feeling sleepy today." He winked. There were more white streaks in his hair, which had grown far longer that was natural in the two days since Niamh had seen him. Today he wore black skinny jeans and biker boots,

with a tattered green t-shirt that read “KISS ME. I’M IRISH” and his faded leather jacket. A feather hung from his hoop earring to rest against his shoulder.

Niamh raised an eyebrow at this shirt, which made him look down and grin. “You never know,” he said. “With all the drunk tourists about, I may get lucky.”

Not deigning to reply, Niamh looked around to see the entrance. Those allowed in the chamber were lined up behind some ropes, and two security guards stood outside to ensure they were the only ones who entered.

Robin gingerly reached into the sling to pull out the changeling and cradle him against his chest. Niamh tried to get the child back, but Robin waved her hands away. He stroked his head gently and murmured some words in his ear Niamh couldn’t understand. A Korean tourist stopped to take a picture of the three of them with his iPad, and Niamh realized with a pang that they must look like the perfect picture of a little Irish family.

“How do you plan to get in?” asked Robin, nodding toward the guards.

“No idea,” Niamh said. “Any suggestions?”

“You can’t expect me to do all the work.”

Niamh bit her lip. The doorway was small. Even with her short stature, Niamh would have to duck to avoid hitting the wooden beam. There was no way to move past the guards unseen.

“Why don’t we sit awhile and have a rest,” suggested Robin, and he settled down onto a woven blanket Niamh was sure hadn’t been there before. With no other solutions in sight, Niamh sighed and sat next to him. She fought tears of frustration and fear, and she was aware that Robin was chatting aimlessly next to her about the weather and other meaningless things. “--still, that was my favorite solstice. Queen Mabh was some woman, not nearly so beautiful as the tales would have you believe, but sharp as a tack, and in possession of some *very* friendly thighs.” Robin winked at her, and Niamh sighed.

“Do you never shut up?”

Robin let loose an ethereal laugh, and Niamh saw some women look his way coquettishly. “You need to relax,” he said, putting an arm around her. A woman with unnaturally blonde hair and an equally unnatural tan glared at Niamh before moving on. “Things will all work out as they’re meant to. What will be will be.”

“Easy for you to say,” muttered Niamh. She looked at the faerie child still in his lap. “Your child hasn’t been taken from you.”

Robin eyed her seriously. “Are you sure things wouldn’t be easier for you this way?” he asked. “You’re so young, and you’ve no money to speak of as well as your gran to look after. Maybe this is for the best.”

Niamh stood up in a fury, practically snatching the fey child from his hands. “You wouldn’t be able to say that if you had a child,” she whispered furiously, conscious of all the people around. “You’re cruel and callous, just like the stories say.”

Robin looked at her levelly. “Not so much cruel as old.” Niamh moved to leave. “Check your pockets, pet.” he called after her.

Niamh moved a short distance from him before she heeded his words. She strapped the changeling back into the sling before feeling in the pockets of her jacket. In one was a crust of stale bread, and in the other was a small stone, triangular with a hole

through it. She shoved the items back into her pockets, made sure she still had her black knife and borrowed candle, and moved a little closer to the entrance, where those lucky enough to be allowed in the chamber were lined up.

“Twenty minutes,” she murmured with a glance at her watch. How was she to get in? The crowd was growing thicker, and some people had formed a large circle around the ancient structure, linking hands and arms and chatting excitedly with one another. Two women dressed in medieval costume, one with purple hair, were beating a steadily faster rhythm on their bodhrans. The beats seemed to coincide with Niamh’s heart, growing ever faster.

She pushed through some people to get as close as she could to the entrance of the chamber, careful to shield the creature in her arms. She looked for a way to slip past the guards.

Covering the faerie child as best she could in his sling and shoving her cold hands into her pockets, she felt the stone Robin had given her. Rolling it around in her fingers and testing the width of the little hole with her pinky. Something came to her from one of the stories she had read: stones with natural holes in them were supposed to reveal faerie glamour.

Niamh pulled the stone from her pocket and peered through the little hole. Nothing at the entrance, nothing anywhere near her looked different. Exasperated, she bowed her head to the child’s, fighting back tears. She had nothing else to go on, so she took a deep breath and looked again.

A soft glow emerged from the entrance, followed by Robin. Niamh pulled the stone away from her eye. He was gone. She looked through the hole again and sucked in a breath at Robin’s appearance. He was taller and impossibly thin, yet still the green eyes and the impish grin as he winked at her from behind the guards, one of whom was yawning in the early morning. The red and white hair shifted and changed, and swirling blue patterns decorated the skin of his bare torso.

Robin raised a hand in her direction, and Niamh saw him whisper something. She felt strange, as if someone had cracked a cold egg on her head that dripped down her body. After another moment of whispering, Robin waved at her to come in. Niamh looked around, there were people everywhere, and another guard was moving in the direction of the entrance, presumably to relieve a colleague. Robin sighed and waved her to him again. Gingerly, with the fey child strapped to her torso, Niamh slipped beneath the rope. No one noticed or moved to stop her. A few more slow steps.

“Hurry,” she heard Robin whisper. “I can’t hold it for long.”

Niamh hurried along, darting through people and slipping as stealthily as she could past the guards. One of them must have felt the air change as she passed, because he turned to look directly at her. Niamh froze in terror, sure that she was caught, as the man narrowed his eyes quizzically, and scrubbed a hand over his eyes to look at her again. Niamh started as something touched her shoulder. It was Robin’s hand, cold and skeletal. His face was strained as he pulled her away from the guard, who shook his head and turned away from her.

“Two minutes,” whispered Robin before he disappeared.

Niamh felt the same cold, dripping feeling down body, and she ducked under a stone to enter the chamber, stepping over another large stone in the floor. Her back foot caught the stone as the child let out a piercing squeal unlike any noise Niamh had ever heard. The guards at the entrance turned to look at Niamh and the eldritch child. "Hey!" shouted the taller of the two. "How did you get in there?"

Niamh recovered her footing and ran down the tunnel toward the chamber. She felt the floor rise beneath her feet as she shuffled through the narrow passageway. Luckily, she was much smaller than the two guards. Niamh could hear the men growing close behind her, panting and shouting.

She whirled around, wondering what to do next. Any time now. The little fey child was squirming in the sling, gurgling in strange tones.

"What now?!" Niamh shouted into the chamber, hoping Robin would be there to lend one final hand of assistance. There was no reply. Niamh froze when she saw the symbol carved into the chamber directly across from the passageway. The large, swirling pattern of the triskelion; she remembered that same symbol on Robin's ring. She looked back to see the guards entering the chamber, and the sunlight creeping across the floor just behind them.

Without giving it much thought, Niamh leapt over a large stone in the floor and slammed her hand directly in the center of the triskelion, in the gap between the three circles. There was a flash of golden light and a rush of air through the chamber, sending the guards cowering against the walls and Niamh's hair flying. Then, darkness and complete stillness.

Niamh woke on her side in the same chamber she had been in before, but it was utterly different. What had been worn, time-beaten stones were now smooth, and carvings that had been difficult to discern were now distinct: intricate patterns of swirls and flowers and crosshatches. The whole chamber was bathed in a silver light that emanated from the stones themselves. Outside Niamh heard singing and the strains of metallic instruments.

The child was still in her arms, squirming and crying in a way that made the hairs on Niamh's arms stand on end. She rocked him a little in an attempt to calm him, and she followed the strains of the uncanny tunes down the passageway. Once again, she ducked to avoid hitting her head at the entrance, and she was faced with a sight unlike anything she had ever beheld.

Strange creatures of all shapes and sizes, some human, some animal, and some unidentifiable, danced in circles around a myriad of fires that stretched taller than any natural flame ever could, seeming almost to disappear in the sky. The sky itself shone like mother-of-pearl and seemed more solid than the sky of the human world, its iridescent glow shifting and changing. She turned her eyes back toward the scene in front of her. Still standing at the entrance of Newgrange, which was now covered in a smooth substance that radiated still more light, Niamh watched the strange dancing.

The music seemed both fast and slow at the same time, as were the movements of those participating in the dance. Most were quite tall and thin like Robin, but these were

even stranger. To Niamh's mind, Robin now seemed to have one foot in the human world that these creatures didn't. Some swirled and bent, their joints twisting further than was natural. Eyes were too big for faces, grins too wide, or hair moved in a way that defied natural law. Some were quite small, no higher than Niamh's knees, and they hopped and darted about with impossible speed and stealth. The animals moved with grace and strength, a keen intelligence in their eyes. She scanned the crowd for sign of Robin, but he was nowhere to be seen.

The whole place shone and shifted, fabrics slid across skin that was supernaturally smooth or scaly, and all was more beautiful than anything Niamh had ever seen. In a moment of curiosity, she put the stone up to her eye and peered through the little hole. It revealed decay. Dead leaves were sewn together haphazardly, hair was ragged, and cobwebs layered all of it, even the creatures themselves.

"Who is this?" a quiet yet commanding voice called out across the clearing, and the music came to an abrupt halt. A figure moved toward Niamh. It was a dark man, taller than any of the others. He put Niamh in mind of a magpie, with skin the color of moonbeams in winter, long, straight hair in the deepest black she'd ever seen, and blue eyes as deep as oceans. His beauty took her breath away, but there was a sharpness to him that made her fearful as well as entranced. When he moved, the others parted to make way for him. He was followed by a massive horse with flaming eyes.

Niamh fought the desire to turn and run. She stood firm, remembering her Ciaran. The figure glided through the crowd with a smoothness that belied his long limbs, and he halted directly in front of her. Niamh took a deep breath and looked up into his face. It was stern, implacable, and utterly stunning. "What are you doing here, human child?"

She had to push the words from her mouth: "You've taken my son. I want him back." She shoved her hands into her pockets to hide their trembling, and despite his unwavering eyes, Niamh continued to look directly up at what must be the faerie king.

There was a moment of silence in which nothing moved. Niamh was aware that the only sound was her own breathing. The faerie child was completely still under the gaze of his sovereign. All eyes were on her. A bead of sweat started at her shoulders and slid along the length of her spine. The unnatural silence was broken by a peal of laughter, a sound like a raven's caw, and all joined in, including the Faerie King himself. Niamh looked around at all of them, some pointed talons or twig-like fingers at her and whispered hysterically to their neighbors. The horse behind the King whinnied and stamped its hooves, but the flaming eyes made its emotions difficult to discern.

Niamh felt a fire ignite deep in her belly at their laughter. Her face turned red, and she squared her shoulders. "Now listen here," she nearly shouted. "You've taken my child, and I want him back. I've brought this little one here to exchange for him, and I'll not take no for an answer."

The laughter continued a moment longer till the King raised a hand. Absolute silence again. He bent down towards Niamh, but not to eye level, looming over her and studying her as one may an insect under glass.

"How do you come here, little child, making demands of beings far older than anything you can possibly imagine?" the King said, in a voice reminding Niamh of a

jaguar. “We are the stuff of dreams and nightmares, and we have inhabited this earth since before the first fish sprouted legs and crawled on land.”

A deep breath to steady her quaking. “I am his mother,” Niamh hoped her voice didn’t shake. “I want him back. I have things to exchange for him.”

Annoyance passed over the King’s face like water over a rock before he collected himself. He put his face closer to Niamh’s. “Are you sure you want him back?” His voice was like silk. “You’re so young, with so much ahead of you. Surely your life would be easier were he not anchoring you.”

“I want my son,” Niamh fought to remain firm.

“But imagine,” the King now whispered in her ear. “You would be free.” He moved around her and placed his corpse-like hands on her shoulders. Niamh flinched. “You can go back to school, become a nurse like you wanted, live the life you dreamed of. None of that will be possible with the boy always crying, eating, shitting, sucking life from your very breasts. There will be time for other children.”

“No,” Niamh nearly stamped her foot like a child herself. “I want Ciaran. I want my son. I offer a trade.”

A sigh from the King, a chill that went straight to Niamh’s bones. “Fine,” he said and waved someone forward.

A small woman emerged from the still watchful crowd. Her hair was gray, and she looked as if she were carved from an ancient oak tree. In her arms was a bundle, and Niamh recognized Ciaran’s little face, peeking out from a cobweb blanket. Her heart leapt into her throat.

“What do you have in exchange for this child?” The King was now facing her again, a few feet away, between her and her child.

Niamh carefully removed the changeling from the sling and held him before her. “I have the faerie child you left me.”

The King waved dismissively. “Set him down. We have no interest in him. What else do you have for us?”

Niamh hesitated a moment. “He will be taken care of?” She paused. “The faerie child, I mean. He’ll be well looked after?”

“Of course. What do you have of value?”

Niamh rummaged in her backpack. “I have a few things.” Carefully, she laid out what she had brought around the child: the candle stub, the black knife, the mint plucked from next to a faerie tree, and at the last moment, the stale crust of bread that Robin had left in her pocket. Reluctantly, she stood and stepped back from the creature, who was still deathly still, the four items placed around him making a sort of compass. Just behind the King was a red fox with a gold earring, sitting neatly on its haunches. Niamh drew in a sharp breath, and the fox winked at her and brought a paw to its mouth in a strange imitation of a shush.

The King crossed his arms, eyeing the things on the ground with apparent disinterest. “Fine. Take back the child,” he said and made to turn away from her. The tiny wooden woman shuffled over to Niamh and was handing her the baby when the King

spoke as if in afterthought. “You can have him,” he paused. “So long as you can hold onto him.”

Niamh’s child passed into her hands, and she beheld with horror as he transformed into a snake, writhing and hissing in her arms and bearing fangs that shone with venom. Swallowing back a scream, Niamh gripped the snake still tighter. *This is a test*, she thought. *I read about this. I just have to keep hold of him.* Still, it was still difficult as the snake in her arms transformed into a small bear, slathering and snarling and scratching at her arms. Niamh squeezed still tighter, pulling the ferocious cub to her chest and closing her eyes. She opened them and let loose a scream of pain to find that she held a red-hot iron against her chest. It took everything in her to fight her instinct and still hold on. Her skin turned red and bubbled up where it was in contact with the iron.

The bar expanded and grew, and at last it was the small Ciaran in her arms. The pain of the hot metal abated, and Niamh’s skin returned to its normal state. Ciaran crinkled his nose a moment and shook his head before letting loose a loud and insistent cry. Niamh, with a sob of relief, looked up at the King. “Take him and leave,” was all he said.

Niamh had gone a few steps before she turned back. “But, the faerie child—” She was cut off when a tall, elegant woman with mossy green hair pushed through the crowd and scooped up her child with a cry. The woman hugged him to her chest and kissed him before smiling at Niamh with understanding. He would be fine.

Afraid of what could happen if she stayed any longer, Niamh moved back to the mound. She resisted the urge to look back as she edged her way through the passage and came again to the chamber with the swirling triskelion on the wall. She placed a hand in the center, and once more there was a flash of light, a rush of air, and then darkness.

Niamh, still in the dark, scabbled about trying to find her way out of the chamber. She felt Ciaran’s warmth against her chest, which gave her some reassurance, but still she could see nothing. Was she blind? Feeling for her cellphone in her back pocket, Niamh was relieved when the screen lit up and illuminated a small corner of the chamber. She turned on the flashlight and made her way gingerly down the sixty-odd feet of passage between her and the world.

Outside it was night. Niamh took a deep breath of the cold air and looked down at her child. Ciaran was awake, and he gazed up at her. He blinked as a couple tears slid down from Niamh’s cheeks and fell onto his own, and she cried and kissed him as the faerie woman had kissed the fey child.

“Well done, you,” came a familiar voice from her right. Niamh pointed her phone in the general direction of the noise, and saw Robin lounging on a large rock. His nocturnal eyes flashed in the light.

She scrubbed at her face with a shirt sleeve. “You’re not supposed to be up there, you know.”

A chuckle as he slid down. “Oh, I know. I love breaking the rules.”

“Is that why you helped me?” Niamh asked.

Robin ruffled Ciaran's dark hair before answering. "No. I owed Siofra a favor. Now my debt is paid."

Niamh wondered what her grandmother may have done for this ancient creature, but was too tired to ask. "What time is it?" She looked around at the abandoned site. "I thought I was gone for an hour at most."

Robin chuckled. "Didn't you read the stories? You've been gone near one-hundred years."

Niamh gasped. "Gran!" The calm of moments ago faded as her heart began to race.

"Nah! I'm only taking the piss," Robin said. "It's been two days. Well, nearly three."

Niamh punched him on the arm. "How am I going to get home now?" she asked. "There won't be another bus till morning, and this is going to be hard to explain."

Robin rubbed at his arm, although Niamh doubted she could hurt him. "You'll have to figure that out for yourself, pet. I did all the work to get you here, and as I said, my debt is paid." With that, he disappeared.

"Thank you," whispered Niamh into the wind. "I'll never forget your kindness to me, even if you are an annoying prat." She thought she heard a snort, but there was still nothing to see.

Niamh looked down at the child in her arms, now sleeping quietly against her chest. "Well, little one. Let's go home." She walked away from Newgrange toward the south, where she knew she could catch a bus in the morning.

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New Fabulist Fiction: How the Fairy Tale Lives on in the 21st Century with “The In-Betweens and Further Fables”

Title of Thesis