



Dead Fairies
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Everyone in the village thought the trapper lived alone. The blacksmith and the baker, the tailor and the innkeeper; the vicar, the schoolmaster, the fool. Each man awoke to his grindstone, whether anvil or alms-begging, and cast his eyes beyond the hill.

Late in the year, the hamlet in a valley six days' travel from the sea vanished in a drab swirl of fog. As the days grew shorter, the sunlight seeped away, until midwinter called the people to their midday meal with scarcely a glimmer of light. When the men thought of the trapper then, they gathered their children at the fire and told them stories of the wild one who fled to the woods.

"A face as dead as stone," said the blacksmith, his fist hammering words thick with conviction.

"Eyes as cold as bone," said the tailor, fingers pressed to forehead.

"A soul of bitter yew." The vicar had read his Bible each day for decades, and recognised sin when he assumed it. He tried to tap his youngest, Magdalene, on the crown of her head, with the cracked spine of his one good book. Nine-year-old Magdalene, who saw everything coming, ducked in time.

When the fog lifted in March, the town mothers threw open every shuttered door in sight. They gathered again in the square at the well, washing linens as they aired their news.

“Another mouth to feed at the Clerachs,” said the innkeeper’s wife, all plain geometry.

“Two lost to fever on the fen,” added the seamstress, soft around the sides.

“Looks like rain,” muttered the vicar’s wife, her face in a pinch.

“Looks like rainbows,” said Magdelene, up to her elbows in water and lye.

Late March warmth carried the blaze of heather from the high ground, and the land beyond the village called its children to play. John, Will and Hugh filled their pockets with pebbles to chase the pheasants from nests in the scrub on the hill; Agatha, Grace and Prudence knotted daisies from the fallows into ribbons and pearls. Magdelene saved three beetles from the cook’s shoe before breakfast, laughed with the wind, and climbed the highest oak at the edge of the woods. She dangled her ankles over fifty feet of nothing, cupped her hands, and whistled. She knew the fairies had landed by the buzzing of their wings.

Everyone who’s ever seen a fairy understands you can’t look them in the eye. Fairies shimmer, sure; they dance. But you catch them in a stare and they fall down dead. Stops their flight. Pins them down. So Magdalene did what she always did, on every day of the year warm enough to scuttle up to the highest branch. She closed her eyes into slits, kept her head very still, and glanced at the fairies through the swamp of her long, dark lashes. Wings shimmering, the fairies landed in the flush of new leaves

below. In figure eights of six, they danced to Magdalene's whistled music and the rising wind.

In the winter, the trapper stayed home. He rummaged in pickling jars, sliced another wafer of meat from the skinned shape hanging in the corner, and played shadow puppets on the wall. The trapper collected snow to melt to water, making soup from the powder he had put up in a cherry bark bowl on the shelf above his bed. In his cabin, made from speckled boulders that had washed downriver from the mountain during the Great Flood when the trapper's father was a child, the bearded, ragged man whittled robins and deer from snap kindling. He held his hunting knife with the blade against the ghost of his left middle finger, the stump a reminder of the troll who'd gnawed it off in a fight. Through the long nights and longer days, the trapper oiled his rigs, polishing the leather on his curled nooses and knotting tattered nets. Repair was cold work.

Second morning of full spring, across the clearing from the forest's highest tree: the trapper lay belly-down in the grass, his hemp sack tucked under an angled knee. Without looking up, he knew the fairies had found a place to play. Distracted, by the sound of it. Go down easier that way.

Head tucked into his chin, nostrils flaring, the trapper crawled to within biting distance of the king of trees. He gripped the thorn-studded mesh of his net, rolled back onto his heels, and sprang.

Fairies don't drown. Fairies don't burn. Fairies don't shrink or wither with the turn of a thousand seasons. They only die if they stop dancing. And fairies can't dance if they can't fly.

With the coarse rope cage lifted over his head, the trapper swept a dozen whirring dervishes into his bag. He cinched the neck tight, until there was no room for wings.

"Away!" A scream from the treetops made the trapper scan the sky. As he looked up, Magdalene shimmied down the trunk, her green eyes smoldering. She stood waist-high to the looming man, shouting loud enough to scare the birds. "You let them go!"

The trapper shrugged off his surprise and reset his brow into a granite line between the ridges on his forehead and the caverns of his eyes. Without a word, he hoisted the no-longer-squirming bag and turned his back.

The child stood her ground. Fiery curls dripping with indignation, fists clenched like a boxer, Magdalene challenged the retreating figure one more time. "You let them go or else!"

Something in her last two words made the trapper stop. From below the last button on his rough blue tunic, he began to laugh. Not with amusement, or mirth. The trapper laughed with grief, to hear the voice of such a bold, wicked, wonderful child. The whisper of another child, mocking the trapper inside his head,

echoed twice as
deep.

Magdalene reached into the pocket of her pinafore, pulled out her green sea glass wishing pebble, and squeezed so tightly that the grain of the worn surface imprinted into her palm. She summoned the words she had heard in the vicar's sermons when he throttled from a trot to a gallop, decrying his congregation's sin.

"You will go no farther!"

His feet froze first, and the trapper had time enough to peer at his own petrified legs before the spell wafted north to his torso, neck, and crown. Each cracking sinew, every stilted bone, turned to rock on the desperate wish of a girl. The sack of death landed heavily, and the force of the blow knocked it open. Magdalene hid her eyes, listened for the faint, weak stirring of wings, and ran deeper into the woods.

By the time she stopped for breath, the shadows of high spring had collapsed into phantoms of winter. The path Magdalene had followed, thinking it the long way home, drew her to a clearing with a rock-hewn hut. She slowed, counting crocuses. The sunset-colored buds urged her nearer to the house. Magdalene wasn't afraid, knowing the trapper could not be close behind; she was curious. She puffed air into her cheeks, strode to the front door, and pushed it open.

Magdalene was no stranger to the butcher or the tanner, and she had heard all the stories of the monster of the forest. Expecting the stench of creatures

not long
dead, her nose took a few moments to adjust to the scents of lavender,
thyme, and
mint. Savoring full breaths, the child scuffed her feet on the dry dirt and
stepped
inside.

“Who...? Who...?” A hollow voice leaned out of the corner of the
squaredoff,
single room.

To Magdalene, the words sounded like a wounded rabbit, beating its
paws
against the ground to raise alarm. She peered down at a pile of furs,
wondering what
trapped animal lay beneath.

“Have you out in a minute.” A perfect mimic, her tone took on the res-
onance
of the village constable, reassuring and stern. “Lie still.”

The covers on the bedroll were piled to the girl’s shoulders. She
heaved the
first pelt, then the next, until all the blankets were strewn like royal
tapestries in a
great hall. And at the bottom, a thin boy of seven or six, with eyes as
warm as nutmeg,
and a pale face slick with fear.

“What have you done with my Da’?” He shifted, straining to raise
himself on
his elbows.

Squinting, Magdalene shook her head at the question. “I’ve come to
save
you.” She pointed to her chest. “I’m the prince, I’ve come to save you.”

She looked apologetic. “Don’t have a steed or anything, mind. We’ll
have to
walk home.”

Before her rescued victim could reply, the girl added, "Are you from the village across the valley, or the Town over the hill?"

"Here." The boy rasped out more words, his exertion focused on holding a hard-earned sitting pose against the back wall. "Nowhere but here."

"Where are the ropes, then?" Fixed to her narrative, Magdalene looked doubtfully at the absence of tie-burns or gilded bars. "Why don't you run?"

A single tear pooled across the boy's nose, and he shivered. He pulled the closest fur over his useless legs. "My Da'll be back soon with more medicine for me. Trouble then. You."

The truth hit Magdalene like a shooting star. She retreated, stumbling against the bed post. Her arms whirled like pinwheels, catching the edge of the shelf. And all the jars of fairy dust came tumbling down.

"No!" Reaching out to catch his only hope, the boy burst into sobs.

After a few minutes, the boy's cries subsided. The girl sat beside him and took his hand, stroking it gently. "Your father, the trapper? Something's happened. I need to get help."

The fairies never ventured near the house of death. But when Magdalene emerged from the trapper's cabin, sat in the moss, closed her eyes, and whistled through a blade of grass, the eight survivors of the dozen who had fled the abandoned net heard her call. They fluttered to the edge of the clearing, listened to

her story, and
called in reinforcements.

“Close your eyes.” The girl instructed her charge. “No peeking.” She pressed her palms over his face to make sure, and Magdalene squeezed her own lids tight. The hut glowed turquoise, humming with ten thousand wings.

When the room was quiet again, Magdalene stood up and lit a lantern. “They’ll be there already. Have to hurry, to explain.”

“Magic?” The boy whispered his hope and stretched his legs.

Magdalene shrugged, suddenly feeling much older and wiser than her new friend. She took his hand, leading him into the twilight. “Not by half. It’s just life.”

The trapper heard them first, as his ears melted from stone to flesh. In his panic, it sounded like a swarm of hornets, until a familiar pitch cut through. “It’s Gray, Da’, it’s me. Me and Magdalene, and the fairies. Come to save you. Come to make me well.”

The last bits of pebble to dissolve were the trapper’s eyes. Flexing his arms, he stared at the children, then reached down. With his son Gray fast asleep on his shoulder, John the trapper carried the tired little girl out of the woods.

“His mother lost to us in childbirth.” John sighed, talking almost to himself. Magdalene memorized every word. “I ran to the village, but no one would come. Said we’d both die here, and fair riddance.”

There is no happy ever after for the village in this story. Magdalene begged John the trapper to leave her nestled in a tree, and in the morning she took her punishment for being out all night. She still washed clothes with the women, and still went to church on Sundays, and still studied dead books with shrill children in the schoolhouse on the green. But Magdalene crept away every spare minute, swam with Gray down by the river, and learned the ways of herbs and healing from the fairies and a kind man who had once been a trapper named John.

Until the morning of her sixteenth birthday, when she was old enough to walk into the woods, leaving the village behind. Old enough to take Gray by the hand, and find her way home.

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