

Buried birds bring ill tidings

When my mother was a little girl, the world was a far more dangerous place. Spirits and ghosts roamed the hills in search of vulnerable souls to occupy and witches cast sleeping spells that lasted for generations. But my mother lived on the prairielands into which the forest evils could not travel far. In a small earthen hut carved into the hillside, my mother grew up surrounded by her mother, her sister, and her great aunt.

Of the three women, my mother was closest to her great aunt Mona, whose old age had bent her nearly in half and whose world knowledge had cast her eyes in cataracts. Still, every evening, my mother would curl up on the floor next to Mona's feet as she spun stories of the enchanting people and creatures she had known in her world travels.

Mona adored my mother, and let her get away with falling asleep in the garden she was supposed to be tending. She laughed instead of scolded when my mother knocked over the salt bowl. She sang songs, told stories, and slipped sweets to my mother as if she were her own daughter. But she absolutely forbade anyone going near the forest surrounding the prairielands, no exceptions, not even for my mother.

One summer evening, my mother was traipsing along the edge of the forest through the gauzy humid air, looking for nuts that had fallen to the ground. When her skirt pockets were full, she turned to make her way back home, when a dark shape caught her eye. In the underbrush, just inside the forest, lay a small black bird. Its eyes were closed and it could almost have been sleeping except for its unnatural stiffness. My mother stepped closer to investigate, the warnings of the forest that Mona had told her time and time again evaporating.

The bird was laying by the base of a large old tree. Its feathers had an oily, iridescent sheen. Gingerly, my mother picked up the bird, the nuts, forgotten, scattered about her feet, and cradled the small creature in her hands. As she turned the bird over in her hands, she noticed a strange translucent pinkness in the underwing; she could almost see the silvery bones shining from beneath the gossamer skin.

A sentimental and emotional creature herself, my mother felt sorry for the little dead bird. She wondered if it had fallen from the tree or it had lost its way home and was too tired to fly home. Tears as big as hyssop blooms streamed down her face landing with a soft *pit pit* on the wing of the black bird. There and then, she decided to hold a little funeral. The shadows grew longer, and the moon was beginning to rise over the crest of the earth, its full face trained on the spot where my mother knelt over the little bird. But my mother paid no attention to the sudden chill in the air as she dug deep into the soft, fragrant earth, creating a small resting place for the innocent corpse. When the hole was ready, my mother gently laid the body to rest. She lined the grave with some of the best nuts she had collected and a few recently blooming white flowers. Then she smoothed the earth back into place and said a small prayer kneeling over the tiny grave.

When she stepped out of the forest outskirts, my mother was surprised and blinded by the light of the moon. Where the forest had been cool and dark, the prairie was stark under the unrelenting light. My mother ran all the way home, the tall grass catching at her bare arms and face seemed

sharper than usual. In the little earthen hut, she found her mother, her sister, and her aunt gathered around, the dinner congealing in the chill of the night air.

“Where have you been?” her mother accosted her as she sat down at her place, “You are covered in dirt.” My mother said nothing and looked at her hands in her lap, still brown and dusty with half anti-moons of dirt clinging under her fingernails. Mona rose and, leaning on the table for support, felt her way down the table to my mother.

“My child, where have you been this auspicious night?” she asked gently. Still my mother said nothing, not wanting to admit she had gone into the forest alone. “Where are the nuts you promised to collect?” Mona pressed gently again. My mother remained mute. “Let us eat,” said Mona finally, making her way back to her place. The family consumed their small dinner in silence.

Later that night, as my mother was throwing out the last of the dish water into the garden, Mona took her by the elbow and led her to the edge of the flower beds. “What did you find in the forest, my dear?” My mother knew her secret had been discovered, she buried her face in Mona’s apron and cried. “There now, it’s alright,” soothed Mona. “I only stepped into the edge of the forest because I saw a dead bird and I w-w-wanted to give it a funeral,” sniffed my mother. Mona stiffened and my mother turned her streaky face up to look at her great aunt. “A dead bird? A bird, are you certain?” rasped Mona quietly. “I-I think so, it was small and had shiny black feathers. It’s eyes were closed but it wasn’t sleeping, it was dead,” said my mother bewildered. “But are you certain it was a bird?” pressed Mona more urgently. “Y-yes,” stammered my mother afraid to look her in the eye. “Alright my child, go inside now, it is time for bed.” My mother slipped from under Mona’s arms and crept back into the house. She undressed and got under the covers with her sister who was already fast asleep. My mother waited a long time, straining to hear Mona come in for bed.

The next morning, my mother awoke to the sound of running and banging. She opened her eyes to a gray sky and her sister standing over her. “Quick, get up!” she said, “Mona is ill!” My mother leapt out of bed and ran to Mona’s bed. Her great aunt was lying there, still and pale as death. Running to her side, my mother gently lifted one of the old wrinkled hands that lay like sleeping doves on either side of the thin body. At her touch, Mona’s paper-thin eyelids opened to reveal her milky eyes. Softer than vapors, one word issued from that ancient mouth, “Fey,” she gasped.

A few weeks later, Mona lay in the same position. She had not spoken or even opened her eyes since. My mother was on her way home from the country library with her arms full of books. Late into that night, my mother sat up by the light of the moon pouring over all the fairytales and fables that she had managed to lug home. The books were familiar to her, Mona used to read these stories to her when she was just learning to walk. Now, my mother scoured the pages for any mentions of fairies and their powers. Finally, in a slim black book embossed with the words “Earthly Angels,” my mother found the tale of the Fey.

*Come from Mother Earth, formed of her in shape and magic way,
these earthly angels tread softer than you or I.
In pools and caves, rivers and dells, and in towers high,*

these soft spirits make their homes, these ethereal, wiley Fey.

*Bribed by the shine of a penny, they play games in human lives,
or drawn by the scent of lavender, honey, and silver sage,
these fairies watch generations pass, as they stew in frozen age;
they befriend the wanderers, the wayward, and the lonely farmer wives.*

*But beware the fairy trick, the dual face, the slight
for some may not always have rosy cheek or butterfly wings ablur.
Beware! That may not be a common fowl, for fairy can turn to bird!
And there are two, not one ways in which angels may take flight.*

*And should your human heart beat an extra time or two
when you see a bird laying dead upon the ground,
keep walking past and leave it where it was found.
For burying a fairy in bird form will bring misery down upon you.*

*Stuck between this world and the next, the fairy spirit roams
looking for a soul to keep, to tether their listless own.
The old, weak, or faithless are the most danger-prone,
Beware the dreadful fairy sleep, that show where the zombies made their homes.*

*Though dead they seem in their feathery forms,
They cannot be buried deep, return they must
to Mother Earth, who herself lays them into dust;
They belong among the flowers, not among the worms.*

In the margins of the yellow pages, my mother saw scrawled, in a familiar hand, the words, “silver pennies (3), silver sage at full moon, Mother Earth (forest).” A chill ran through my mother, it was Mona’s handwriting. She thought about the small black bird that she had buried and a shiver ran down her back.

My mother fell into an uneasy sleep that night. She dreamed that she was wading through a shallow river so cold it felt as if thin knives of ice were slicing through her ankles. On the opposite bank stood Mona with her back to my mother. But she was a younger version of herself, she stood tall and slender as a new spruce, but she stood in the shade of a gnarled old oak tree that was twisted and bent in the same way as the Mona my mother knew. With her left hand, Mona threw three small, shiny disks at the twisted tree. Then she bent down and with her right hand, plucked up three leaves of a silvery bush, and crushed them between her fingers. My mother tried to wade farther into the river to get closer to Mona, but her feet became heavier and heavier and the water kept rising until she was up to her neck in the icy water. As the water rose higher still, my mother tried to call out but the stream rushed into her mouth. Mona turned at the sound. But it wasn’t Mona. It was a strange woman with an economical face. Her features seemed oddly blurred and faint. Her shadow of a mouth curved itself into a smile. My mother woke up crying Mona’s name.

The next week, the doctor came from the village to see Mona. He looked her all over, felt at her throat and wrists, and listened to her faint breaths. Finally, he got up and shook his head sadly, "She is weak, that is all I can discern. I know nothing of this illness and thus, know nothing of a cure. She likely has but a few more days of life left in her." At these words, my mother, who had been standing by the foot of Mona's bed anxiously clutching the thin black book, ran out of the house. Her sister and mother called to her, but she ran more determinedly toward the outskirts of the forest. When she reached the edge, just outside the spot where she had found and buried the little black bird, she stopped. She dropped down on all fours and began digging in the dirt under a small clump of bushes. She stood up and slipped three silver pennies and silver sage leaves into her pocket. Then she took a deep breath and stepped into the forest.

First, she dug up the body of what she now knew to be a fairy. The little grave was starting to be overgrown by white flowers, but its outline was still plainly visible. My mother dug with her hands until she felt a soft feathery body. Gingerly, she lifted the body from the dirt and brushed away the debris. To her surprise, the bird was exactly as it had been when she had buried it. No signs of decay seemed to have intruded on the creature's peaceful rest. She slipped the fairy gently into her pocket with the pennies and sage. Then she set out into the soft gray of the forest.

The sun was setting, my mother knew, as the light was slanting low amongst the trunks of the trees. She quickened her pace, listening for the river. She knew she had set out going north because she knew the river wound its way through the forest and came out at the nearest village. At last, she heard the soft burbling gasp of the river as it sped by. When she reached its bank, she turned and followed the river west. By now it was so dark, she could only make out the outlines of the nearest trees, but keeping the river on her right she trudged on. At last, around what seemed to be the thousandth bend, she came to an enormous old gnarled oak tree bending over the river from the far bank. Knowing the only path forward was across, she slipped off her shoes and left them next to a worn stump. She was feeling her way blindly down the shallow riverbank when suddenly the whole forest was aglow with the light of the moon shining splendidly down. It illuminated my mother, the river, and the tree. Bolstered by the sudden light, my mother emptied the contents of her pockets into her hands plunged into the river. It was not so deep, but it came up past her hips so that her skirt billowed out from her for a moment before sinking. It was not so cold, but she could feel small knives beginning to whittle into her bones as she waded toward the center of the current. As she moved slowly through the river, she looked to the opposite bank, straining her eyes for signs of that woman from her dream. There was no one to be seen.

Shivering, my mother clambered out of the river on the other side, using the branches from the old oak tree to help her. Exhausted, she stepped into the clearing, looking around her, still clutching her three silver pennies, the leaves of silver sage, and the body of the bird in her hands. "Now what?" she yelled up at the sky, "Now what?" she repeated more quietly to herself. Overhead the full moon was reaching its peak over the clearing. She looked down to find that her shadow had receded into a circle about her feet. Suddenly, she felt very foolish. She had left her family, she had left Mona who was clinging desperately to life at this very moment. She had bolted without any explanation. They must be worried and frantic about her. She was resolved to turn back, to give up her quest, to see Mona before she died. But she could not move, she was rooted to the spot. With every fiber of her body, she tried to lift one foot from the ground, but she

could not. Growing desperate and frustrated, she flung down the pennies and as she twisted her body, she accidentally crushed the sage. Immediately, the clearing was filled with a warm, comforting light. A woman appeared at the foot of the clearing and appeared to be walking toward her, floating almost. My mother stopped struggling and stared. It was Mona. No, it was the woman from her dream. Already, my mother could make out her blurred face and faint features. The woman seemed to be glowing faintly and shimmering as she walked closer and closer.

When she reached my mother, she stopped walking, but she seemed in constant motion. My mother was not afraid. A warm sensation of relief was washing over her. *You have something of mine* came a silvery voice in her head. “Mmm yes” murmured my mother. She opened her hand and held out the bird to the woman. The woman reached out and lifted the small body. Holding it out in her palm, she blew gently. The feathers were whisked away like a layer of dust and in their place lay a tiny fairy. Winged, with gold skin and silver hair, the tiny body lay with its eyes closed. The woman blew again, and it was the fairy this time that blew away in a fine shower of silver-gold dust. *Thank you my dear, thank you. This world and the next have now been restored to order. We shall meet again one day I suspect.* With those words, the woman appeared to recede into nothingness, as my mother’s vision faded into a stream of silver.

My mother awoke to a blue sky and Mona bending over her. She was curled up at the outskirts of the forest, just inside the prairie. She could make out her mother and sister standing at the entrance to their garden waving at her and beaming. “It’s time to come home, my child,” said Mona in her familiar papery rasp.

The End.