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The Tender Witch



Prologue

There is and has always been a humming to the wind that once had Eloise considering the possibility of its personality. Within the reaches of North End, the wind does rage and fling itself around; no one could argue against its apparent temperament. But Eloise thought that more often the wind was a perfectly tender and sweet thing. Rather than steal thatch and umbrellas, if one kept their eyes aware one could see that it liked to lull over the slant heads of hills and flutter softly, singing past the ears with a lick of salt and ice. This personification was her total truth, and as a child she could not be convinced otherwise. Eloise was born to strangeness.

She thought when it danced, she ought to. When it sang, she ought to. Surely there was life in it if it could outrace her and strike melodies in the porch chimes, if it could, as she'd seen it do many a time, spook the shepherding hounds into fits of howling in the night or persuade the falling of the rain to splash into the face of one of the town's tutors. It had a humor she thought to be most clever. And her mother agreed. Her mother said, and was pleased to hear little Eloise say so too, that the wind had a certain spirit that enlivened the world. It was a curious thing to say, but Mrs. Heather Wayward was hardly of the usual mind.

She had innumerable curious opinions which she did not share with the town but surely did share with her daughter. She told Eloise that when the stalks of the gypsy grass swayed with the humming wind, they were calling Eloise from across the way to join them in their waltzing, and what more enthusiastic partners could she want as they would never tire, unlike the house cat. The birds cawing above the cliffs with their brackish wings and song were griping to her about their daily catch and about the weather, for even birds must talk about the weather. It followed that Eloise often thought to yell back her greeting as far as her voice would carry, as a good neighbor should.

And her mother said that when the clouds tore themselves to pieces and thundered, Eloise should not be afraid. It was the world speaking to her, and the world, being very big, had a booming voice. The rain that followed was a gift no matter how dreary and no matter the wet socks or the many slippings into the mud, since a bath will remedy that; without the rain, the witch hazel and wild lupin would not bloom come springtime, her mother said, and what a shame it would be to rob the earth of its lavender blush. If Eloise must remember something, it was not to scorn the rain for being rain, no matter how adamant the town's Speakers were about the wrathful nature of it.

They lived in a world, her mother said, that depended on the good will of every creature to care for it and to see in it the same life that they cherished in themselves. Only in that realization could she feel truly alive. And this all seemed very rational to a young child.

When her mother gave Eloise these wisdoms as she had on several occasions, Eloise was sifting the soil behind their house. She'd settled her little plot with a twine fence and cleared away the green, fumbling beside her mother's able hands to keep the dirt from her skirt. Eloise could've counted her years on one hand, if she was ace to count at that age, and could not yet see above the grass without a spritely jump. It is a memory she wouldn't have the mind to recall, having been so young.

"Do you think the spirits can see me, Mama?" Eloise asked.

"I think they watch over us all, especially little faes like you," her mother said, kissing Eloise's head and kneeling by her side.

“I saw faces in the clouds. There was a cow, and a ribbiter, with huge long legs. But I didn’t see the giants’ castle. I guess they moved. Do spirits live in flowers too? Will I see them?”

“Maybe, who can say, little fae.”

“I’d like to see them one day. I know they’re there, but I’d like to see them.”

“Well it’s not just spirits, dear. The world is made of spirits, yes. But it’s more than that, can you feel it?”

“I feel cold. I think I must be blind. None of the spirits want me to see them.”

“Oh, come here.” Her mother leaned into Eloise where she knelt, and her arm wrapped itself around the girl’s waist. “You can see just fine, I know you. Let’s try this: can you feel the world in you, fae? You’re a part of it. There’s a little star in your chest, just like you see in the night sky, just as bright. It keeps your heart going, it makes you cry and makes you laugh. You might call it a spirit, or a soul. It’s a precious thing, to be alive. I have a star too, and the cat, and your friends, the pollywogs, and little acorns too, we all have one. I know you’ve never seen an acorn, but I promise one day you will. I’ll take you to where the acorns grow. Do you feel the world now?”

Eloise laughed as her mother tickled under her arm and prodded her chest, right where her star would be. “Stop, stop! I don’t know!” And more laughter in between, until she was released. “I’m still cold. How do the stars get there? How many can I have?”

“Oh, no, we only get one star, fae, from the moment we’re born, there it is,” her mother chuckled warm cloudy breaths from her smile. She tossed the tail of her scarf over her shoulder, removed her quilted gloves, and laid down her hand spade. “Would you like to keep a secret?”

Her mother had such a gentle air about her, an air Eloise imagined the spirits themselves embodied, if Eloise could see them. She thought her mother seemed to breathe deeper when the breeze passed, and thought her as elegant as a flowering statuette sitting there amidst the grass in her apron; Eloise often hid flowers in the long tresses of her mother’s hair. But there is little a mother does not know about their children, or most things

relating to life, and the hiding of flowers was a charm to a mother who, beyond her family, had few people left in the world to humor her.

“A secret?” Eloise asked.

“Yes, if you think you can keep it.”

“Of course I can! I won’t tell a soul, not the cat, not even the birds, I promise!” And Eloise meant it, she crossed her starry heart and glanced suspiciously to the few spruce trees in the yard, stumpy and thick with spring nests. For what child doesn’t want a secret?

“That’s my good girl.”

Her mother took a handful of clover seeds from a pouch on her waist and she held them out to Eloise with a contented sigh. The girl was struck by curiosity, the kind when one expects to find in the ordinary something drastically new.

“Take what you will,” her mother said.

Eloise looked on intently, forgetting the mud that stuck to her bitty hands, and picked some of the dainty seeds. She pinched them firm and let them sit in the cup of her hand. She held them to her ear.

“Do you have a secret?” she asked.

The girl’s whispering startled her mother into a broad smile, and her mother looked behind them at the house. Liam Wayward worked within, drafting away, likely, beside the kitchen hearth and his favorite window, with his fountain pen and his feet propped and crossed. He did not live here to work the rough land as most other people did, but because his wife enjoyed the space so much. He was a man who loved his wife and daughter more than sun or sleep or self, and being far removed from town he knew his dears were safe.

“You’re a good listener, little fae. But I’m not sure you’ve ears to hear their secrets yet.” She brought Eloise’s hands forward and held them, and looked at those little seeds as if they were her other children. “This is the secret I would like to give you. Keep it hidden, now. And don’t forget. A hidden secret is a safe one, and all up to you to keep.”

The seeds still in Eloise’s hand, herself confused and waiting, itching to know, her mother proceeded to hold one finger up to the sky with her eyes trained on the patient girl. They leaned in together as her mother laid

her finger on the seeds. The ring on her finger glinted in the daylight and bewildered Eloise's eye.

"Il'al'dien," her mother said.

Her mother's breath graced Eloise's cheek, and she looked down and saw in the soft sunlight of the fog a budding glow of warmth in her childish hands. The seeds like smoldering embers broke through their shells and spread their hairy white roots to curl around her fingers. They moved like living things and came to a rest when her mother moved her finger away. A patch of green, grown and alive, sat nested in Eloise's trembling hands.

"My stars, my stars!"

Eloise shrieked in the moment it happened and jumped up and around for joy, tripping in the grass and showing the sky, the wind, the birds her secret high above her head. She was ecstatic with the touch of life in her hands! So, this is what a star could do! Her mother stood to follow her, faltering with a weakness in her knees, but grabbed the girl's wrist before she could run down the hill, through the mudroom, and back into the house to break her promised silence.

"Eloise, wait." Her mother huffed, eyes tired and greying.

But a child, Eloise, does not notice this. Mothers and fathers are immortal to children, before they are not. They are bastions of feeling. They know to live in the world is a costly thing, as is keeping its secrets.

"But Papa—"

"No, little one," her mother shook her head and drew Eloise close by the shoulders. She bent and held Eloise's face, her eyes looked into the girl's with a benevolent intensity. She's a wonder, a beautiful wonder, Eloise would've thought. "A secret is a secret, no matter how dearly you wish to share it."

"But?" Eloise's smile turned to crumbs.

"Papa knows plenty of your Mama's secrets. But the world would be more difficult for him should he know that not one but two of his ladies have a secret to keep." Her mother looked up at the sky, the birds, their freedom. Her voice grew bold; had Eloise been prodigally perceptive, she'd have known it was a dangerous boldness to keep secrets, or share

them, or speak a word of any of this, especially her mother being who she was. "I think you deserve to know, even if not all the world believes in spirits like you, fae, or wishes to."

"They don't believe in spirits? That's preposterous!" It was a new word Eloise had borrowed from her Papa. "Not dust sprites or dandelion hoppers? Not harvest fairies? Not cloudy giants? Not even the wind? They don't believe in the wind? What is the world coming to." Another phrase of his which he used more often than, during days of the Hunts when hags were still a nuisance to the civilized world.

Recalling the silly mumblings a child will think to spout all with an earnest air of truth and loudly too, and knowing they are experts in such matters, Eloise might call herself a daft little thing now; for who can admit to what a dandelion hopper is or what it likes to do, what dandelions it likes to perch on and hop off of the most or, most crucially, in what season or at what time of day a hopper will emerge from the fluffy center of their chosen weed to bid a child like Eloise good morning? Later, when she would attend the local academy, certainly her classmates could not say, nor her tutors. Perhaps not even her mother was that wise to the world. But Eloise's mother believed in the fancies of her child and she never once laughed.

"People believe in the wind, silly girl." She picked Eloise up in her arms and kissed Eloise's cheek, her closed eyes. Her mother's long hair fell all about her, smelling of warm wheat and flour. "But," her mother looked to the house, and east along the cliffs where the two of them could just see the outskirts of the town through the sea fog, "remember that not everyone believes in the things you do. Please remember."

"They don't like my secret, Mama? That's not fair." Eloise had not yet let loose her secret clover patch.

"I'm afraid they would not. You must keep it to yourself, understand? But how nice to have a secret, don't you think?"

Eloise turned heavy as her heart did and her mother set her down. She led Eloise back up the hill and over to the unsprouted seedlings they had already laid in the ground. She wished to persuade Eloise to let go of her secret, but Eloise smothered the flowers against her chest.

“Eloise, dear, if you never plant them how will they grow?”

“You can make them grow. So I can keep them with me now, okay?”

“I’m afraid that’s not how it works, fae. Without the earth they will wither and die. No one, not even your Mama, can stop that. But where there is an end there is a beginning. This I hope you understand. I’m afraid there are no exceptions.” Her mother pried open her reluctant hands and put their secret back into the ground, and she moved their hands together to cover the fragile roots in soil. “This is the beautiful beginning, right here.”

“Do you think I can do it, Mama?”

“Perhaps.”

“What if I practice a long time? Every morning? Like the waltz? Oh! Or my alphabets?” Eloise trilled her clumsy tongue to imitate her mother’s sacred il- and al- sounds, a language long forgotten. “I want to make the stars come out!”

“Perhaps, fae, it can be a tricky thing. And nothing is without consequence.”

Her mother gave her another handful of seeds before standing to leave. Eloise’s eyes bent to stare at the new clover flowers, white and soft beside the other asters and irises. She saw nothing but them, and her mother was pleased with that. Here, Heather thought, in this garden, far from all of the hate in the world, was a place safe to keep secrets. A place safe to live, she hoped.

“It’s time for lunch, I think,” her mother said. “We’ll see if I can’t convince Papa to join us, how does that sound? Finish with the garden, dear, and come inside to wash those hands when you’re ready. And do remember, Eloise,” and she took Eloise’s hands once more, kissing the dirt on her little palms and wrists, “I gave you this secret because it is precious. One day, if you are a patient and loving girl, and caring, and old enough to appreciate the wisdom and language of the world, you’ll be able to keep secrets of your own, find your own words to coax out the spirits. Maybe meet more like yourself, in time, I hope. My wonderful little miracle. My secret.”

She pat Eloise’s head before going to the house. Her face watched the

road to town which was empty as it always was, and she waved at her husband who, having steeped the tea and finished his sketch, was calling her name from the open door of the mudroom. His voice was clear and buoyant on the wind. The wind always and without fail carried their happy voices over the heath to Eloise no matter the distance, no matter how bewitched by this or that wayward toad or hornworm; the wind brought Eloise home to them. Her mother lazed down the hill and greeted him with a kiss on his chin. He always smiled to see her.

Alone in that field, Eloise blinked away her wonder and was struck by the immense gravity of what it meant to have her very own secret. She'd never had one before, being so young. She leaned in with her nose above the planted patch and kissed the leaves with a face full of sincerity, rubbing her pink cheeks in the dew and tasting the land.

“Good morning, little friends. I'll keep you safe. I promise.”

And that was the end of the strangeness, that day. They had their picnic lunch and her father tossed her into the air like a hatchling bird and her mother wiped her cheeks clean of jam, and nothing odd besides would reveal itself to Eloise before her tucking in at sundown.

She would try for many days after to talk to her dear little clover friends, but nothing came of that but some fussy tempers, for she never could tell whether or not the little friends could speak to her, and she tried so hard, as any child would, to will them to do what she wanted. She brought them indoors and tied bows around their clay pots and kept them company for tea, she placed them by the window of her room, and kissed them goodnight after gifting them fresh dirt.

But she never saw the spirits she longed to see, however many times her mother harped to reassure her belief in them, and that is all her mother seemed to be able to do; there would be no more shows of stars or starry words during the dark years of the Hunts. The Hunts seemed to be upon them always, then. And Eloise was not told why she was not to speak a word in town, no words at all, that her parents did not ask of her.

And when a decade passed, there was a complete end to it. Eloise thought the chiming of the wind was nice, surely, and she liked the whistling of it, but to believe in spirits was too strange. It was a child's

fantasy. And other children would not suffer her for it. And other adults, in a world so suspicious as this, thought her a filthy whelp, an incorrigible inevitability: “one day, she’ll be old enough to weave curses for us all,” they rallied. “Just like her hag of a mother.”

By the passing of another decade, the world had celebrated its final Hunt, that grand extinction to the race of people they called Snatching Hags. But Eloise was and would always be that strange woman who, now grown and alone in her house, may or may not have the blood of hags in her veins. The people of town may never know. They never saw her magics, never heard her strange words, and there the fear festered: the fear of not knowing what cursed happenings plagued that “hagchild’s” house and its lights like shuddersome wisps on the far end of the north cliffs.

The world hates them, the thought of them, the hags: their unnatural bodies, which age as any other but do not rot, decay, or wither in death, their peculiar afflictions, their scars, their magics, their language which is so unlike the world’s and yet is entirely of the world. Their supposed indifference to death. Their essential humanity, their love; Heather Wayward loved the world and its miracles. But, the world hated her too.

Eloise, as a child, would not have been afraid to fall, to die, from the heights of her cliffs as many supposed hags did in those days, their ankles tied. The wind would catch her, she would have said, hope alight in her eyes, and she would have been right. Had the mobs taken her to the edge of the water, the wind would have greeted her there. It would have caught her and laid her down in the ground and made flowers of her, and she would not fear death because she is of the world. Even if, now, she does not remember it, she is of the world.

It is a dark and purposed forgetfulness that has bound her heart, though the binding of it was no fault of her own. She had no say, like many of us, what she would or would not remember after the passing of so many seasons. There the image lies, that glance of the past, that singular day when her mother showed her some proof of extra worldliness. It is only a hazy recollection of indecipherable pictures, faces, smells, and feelings compounded: her mother’s hair, the tangling of it in Eloise’s hands and the warm dusty smell of it in the cold wind. There is little room for one

day of remembered happiness in a haunted mind, and less room for magics, that forbidden art.

But even if this forgetfulness was no defense against the callous people of North End and beyond, already so set in their beliefs, it did, one might hope, give Eloise a sense of ease as if her place in the world were not balancing strictly between outcast and monster; as if she were one of them and all of their threats meant nothing because she was no hag; as if she may, one day, in a distant future, feel alive; as if she had a right to live.

Winter is turning to spring in North End. It is late to change but that is the way there, and the lands in the south grow warm on the eve of their earlier summers. We come now out of the dark half of the year into new darkness.

Her mother's poppies and chamomile still grow in the pastures along the precipice of the white cliffs and the ocean. The house still stands like a hermit with its back tucked into the earth for all the shelter it may provide, though it may leak buckets from day to day. The wind still smells sweetest there where Eloise was born, in that same field under sky and rain. There is all that is beauty there. But now, after the years of persecution, of death, how could there be any tangible kind of life her mother revered? No fairies, spirits, or stars to see. When they died—when her mother died—so too did the world