

The Healer
Branwen's Grandmother's Story

By Dee Morrison Meaney

She woke in the dark, the moonlight falling through bare, black branches over her head. She sat up, her back against the gnarled oak, the white light pouring over her, renewing at last the ancient power which had grown so weak. Her eyes gleamed beneath the tangled aureole of her dark hair. She watched the sleeping men. Her ears roared with the sound of axes falling, men laughing. These men. She looked down at the rope which cut into her wrists. She frowned. They had tried to bind her. The rope came apart under her gaze and fell away. She crouched in the moonlight and watched the sleeping men, the men who had destroyed the ancient shrine, who had killed the others, Heraclia and old Talathiel. Three of them. The last who served the Goddess. How long had it been? Looking up, she saw that the moon waxed toward full. A week. For seven nights she had abandoned her body to them, crawling into the secret places within the core of her being where they could not reach her. A week. Their spilled seed was dried on her legs, stiffened on her torn skirt. Their rank smell rose from her own body. A week. A week for her fury to grow, feeding on her helplessness. Seven nights for her anger to tear at the covering of her soul. Tonight, as the moon shone clear and white in the night sky, the wild thing which raged inside her broke loose, virulence boiling up, spilling over.

The men stirred as the wind dropped, signaling the dawn. She waited. Grumbling and swearing, they woke. Her back against the tree, her hands behind her, she watched with glittering eyes while they emptied their bladders, urinating openly, ignoring her. While two of them loaded the pony, the leader turned toward her, tugging aside his codpiece.

“We’ve a full day’s march if we’re to make Salisbury before dark,” one of the others growled without turning around.

The leader grinned. There were wide gaps between his yellow teeth. She waited until he stood over her, his manhood uncovered, engorged, and then her fury blazed forth. Like a raging firestorm, it focused on his maleness, a raging fire which burned in that hated member. The sudden agony drove him back, screaming, tearing at himself. She laughed. Like a maenad she laughed, and her fury was wild and knew no bound. The power of her mind over the man’s was absolute. Frenzied with the pain of her outrage, he drew a dagger and mutilated himself. The others turned to run. Her mind reached out, catching at them like brambles, tangling their feet so they could not flee.

They looked back at her, their eyes wild with fear. She did not move, waiting while their terror grew. When it possessed them wholly, when it had burned out their souls, leaving empty, hollow shells, no longer men, she walked away and, if her feet followed any path, she did not know it for the fury that had raged within her had been too great to have been endured without hurt.

The sky grew leaden and there was no sun. The wind had come up and blew through the ragged blue robe she wore. Her thin boots, made for another life, had worn through and gave her small protection from the frozen ground. Once, coming over the crest of a low hill, she saw a cottage, thick-thatched, warm and safe. There was the smell of new bread in the air. She hurried down the slope. A dog barked.

A woman opened the door and peered out. "Who are you?" she asked.

"Where is my mother?"

"What do you want here?"

"What have you done with my mother?"

"Wait," the goodwife said. She was gone only a minute, returning with a plump loaf of dark bread, still fragrant from the oven. "Take this," she said, holding it out. When the other woman stretched out her hand, the goodwife snatched back the loaf. "First," she said, "we must ask Christ's blessing on us both."

The small, dark woman stepped back as if the goodwife had offered her an adder. "I can,not," she whispered.

"Then go away, child of faery," the other hissed. "We are good Christians here. We have nothing for your kind." She picked up a broom from behind the door and began striking the beggar, crying, "Fey! Fey!"

The ragged woman was confused by the shouting, for it seemed there were other voices, a ring of children surrounding her, taunting her; and she was only a small child herself, smaller than the others who picked up stones, and began throwing them at her. She began to run. A stone hit her shoulder and she ran faster, on and on, and always the sound of voices screaming, "Fey! Fey!" When at last she could run no further, she walked and did not notice the rain.

Later, she came to a shepherd's croft. A great dog came bounding out from the sheepfold, his hackles raised. She put her hand out to him, and he grew quiet and came and stood beside her. She rested her hand on his neck.

“What is it, Colm?” the shepherd asked, coming to see. “Oh,” he said, and stopped. Her eyes were all he noticed at first, like those of some animal caught in a snare. “Who are you?” he asked.

She did not answer.

“Colm seems to think you’re all right. I’ve not seen him take to a stranger before.” After a moment he said, “We should go in, out of the rain.” He picked up an armload of wood from the stack beside the cottage and went in, leaving the door open.

She hesitated outside the door, watching the fire leap up in the hearth as he added the new wood. Colm whined and tugged at her ragged robe. Trembling, she went in and crouched against the wall. The great dog licked her face.

“I’ll close the door now.” The man moved slowly, his voice low and gentle.

She stared at the fire.

“I was just fixing a bit of supper,” the man went on in the same calm voice, “for the old man and me. Are you hungry?” He did not seem to expect an answer. “He doesn’t eat much any more. I guess he doesn’t need it though—hardly moves from his seat there in the corner. Blind, you know, and gone up here.” He tapped his head. “You really should get out of those wet things. There’s a thick blanket on the bed. Wrap up in it if you like while I feed the old man. When you’re ready there’s cheese and the dark bread I baked yesterday. Or was it the day before, eh Colm?” He laughed. “We lose track, you see—one day is like the rest up here.”

His voice droned on, like bees in a meadow when the sun is bright and warm and the smell of larkspur hangs heavy in the air. She leaned back against the smooth bark of an ancient rowan and slept.

When she woke the room was dark. The fire had burned low among the stones of the crude central hearth. Smoke hung thinly beneath the rafters. She lay quite still, feeling the rough wool blanket against her body. She heard the wind and the rattle of sleet on the thatch.

“I’m glad you’re awake,” a voice said. A man stood in the shadow beyond the fire’s glow. He held an axe in one hand. She felt a scream start up inside of her. A great dog thrust his nose over the edge of the pallet where she had slept. The scream became a small cry.

“It’s the wolves,” the man said as if he had not heard her. “The storm’s brought them down. Colm and me, we’ve got to go out. They’ll be in after the sheep. You’ll be safe enough here. The old man’s quite likely to sleep ‘til dawn. With luck we’ll be back before then.” He opened the door and stepped out into the dark swirling sleet and snow. He looked back at her once as if he would say

something more, but he only shook his head. "Come along then, Colm," he said. "We'd best be going." Reaching in, he pulled the door closed.

When he had gone, she got up. Her blue robe lay folded on the table against the wall. It was dry. She had slept for a long time. She slipped it over her head. It had been mended, neatly stitched with thread spun from unbleached sheep's wool. She touched the stitches wondering how they had come to be there. She drank from a cup set beside a wooden bucket. There was cheese and a hard crust of dark bread. When she had eaten she sat for a while watching an old man sleep. They she lay down across the room from him and slept again.

She never heard the wolves as they descended on the fold that night. Not until morning, when the dog whined and scratched at the door, did she wake. The door opened a man came in. Who was he? How had she come to this place? She struggled to sit up. She must go. She could not stay here. There was only pain for her among his kind.

"They got a sheep last night before we drove them off." Sinking onto the low stool, he head drooped wearily. There was blood on his hands.

She shuddered. Wolves. After his sheep. She remembered that. He and the dog had gone out in the night. There was no need. She would send the wolves away. He had been kind to her. She would repay him. Something. Before she left. She went out. Her feet were bare on the cold, wet ground.

"Wait," he cried, "don't go."

"It will be all right." She looked at him so oddly he said nothing more.

The storm had blown itself out during the night. The early morning sky was clearing. She followed the wolf trail up into the hills. When she found them, dened up among some rocks, she called out in their language, the ancient language of men and beasts.

The leader of the pack stretched and blinked his yellow eyes, yawning great gaping redness and powerful white fangs. "Who are you? Who calls to us as none had done in the long memory of this pack?"

"You know me." She raised her arm, pointed at a dark stone which stood in the midst of the pack. It sprang into flame. The wolves moved back, away from the red flower they feared.

Only the old one did not move. "What to you want with us?" he asked.

"The shepherd," she said. "Leave his flock untouched. Hunt elsewhere."

"The pups are due soon. The bitches cannot hunt."

“Leave the shepherd in peace.”

The old wolf hesitated, prowling back and forth across the open space. The rock flamed higher, melting the snow cover around it. At last he looked at her and growled, “So be it.”

The fire died. The rock stood dark. Water dripped down one side. When she turned to go back the way she had come, the shepherd was standing beside the trail watching her.

“Who are you, that even the wolves listen to your voice?”

“They will not trouble you again,” she said simply.

They walked a little way in silence, and then he said, “I am called Caedmon.”

“My name is Anuvial.”

That evening as they sat by the fire, an old man sang blind songs in no man’s language.

Caedmon said softly, “I’ve not heard him sing in many months. He knows you are here.”

She looked at the shepherd, neither young nor old, who sat near the fire, his dog at his feet. His hair and ragged beard were nut brown; his eyes were blue. He wore homespun wool, dyed long since with the green of bearberry, loose-fitting trousers and tunic. “I will go in the morning,” she said.

“You can not.” He stood up, disturbing the dog. The old man stopped singing. “How can you leave? You have no boots, no cloak. I have none to offer you here. You must stay until spring. You can not go now.” The words hung in the silence. A log shifted on the fire. “Are you afraid of me? Is that what it is? Can you command the wolves and still be afraid of me?” He laughed then for it seemed absurd to him.

The next day he took the flock out of the fold and back up onto the hillside, for the sky was clear and the January sun bright. She saw him outlined against the blue. She went around the cottage to where the sheepfold stood thawing in the sudden sun. Caught on the fence posts and rails were tufts of white wool. She collected these and then went out onto the hillside where she gathered others, caught on thorns and branches. When Caedmon came in for supper she was combing the tufts with the teasel heads she had found where he kept them, in a basket beneath the table. She put the work down when he came in, watching him cut the bread she had baked.

“Good,” he said, his mouth full. “Tomorrow I will cook a rabbit for our dinner. I set the snare this afternoon.”

“No, you must not.” She turned and ran out the door.

He put down the bread and went after her.

She stood in the center of the yard. There were tears in her eyes. "Where is it?" she asked.

He led her into the high meadow where the snare had been set. It had been sprung. The soft brown rabbit was dead, his neck snapped. She took the broken body in her hands smoothing the ruffled fur.

"It's because you can speak to them, isn't it? I should have known." He kicked the ground. "I was trying to please you."

She laid the rabbit down and turned away, leaving the shepherd standing there.

He came into the cottage later and dropped a thick shearing at her feet. "The market was low last year. I held this back. Take it. It will be enough for a cloak. When it is done you will be able to leave. I will mend your boots."

"Thank you," she said. Then, as if to absolve him, she smiled, a fragile smile, like the small, white mayflower hidden among the soft green of new ferns.

In the days which followed, they tended the old man, kept the fire going, brought water up from the brook, and cooked the simple meals they ate together, sharing the work easily between them, each doing what needed to be done.

One rainy day he left the sheep in the fold and disappeared for several hours, returning just before dark. The sheepskin cloak he wore was wet and dripping. He handed her a basket. "I've brought you some eggs."

"How good you are to me, Caedmon," she said, smiling at him. Her smile was warm now like a field of wildflowers in the summer sun.

"The sheep need tending," he said, suddenly awkward. "Come along, Colm." She heard him whistling as he forked hay into the fold.

It was a week later when he brought her a lark with a broken wing. "I found it along the path. It's not badly hurt, only its wing, I think. I hoped, perhaps, you could fix it."

She took the lark tenderly, stroking it as he had seen her stroke the rabbit. She spoke to the bird, quieting it, crooning words he could not understand. He watched her hands straighten the bent wing, so sure of what they did. He shaved a splint off a log he had split for the fire, and gave it to her. She bound it with a piece of the thread she had been spinning. When the lark lay warm and safe in the wooden dough bowl beside the fire, she reached out to touch the gentle shepherd. He stood very still and her fingers brushed his chest. "Thank you," she said.

It took three weeks to spin the yarn, holding it in one hand while a spindle, made from a bit of stout hawthorn branch, spun around, drawing out the thread. When she was done she took one hundred smooth stones from the cold water of the brook. She tied each stone to one end of a length of yarn, the other end she fastened to the low beam along one wall. Then she began to weave the cloth for her cloak. Daily the length of cloth grew under her fingers.

In the quiet evenings, the shepherd watched her work. “You’ve wonderful skill in your hands,” he said once, “to make a cloth so fine on such a loom.”

The weeks passed. The lark’s wing mended and she set it free, watching it fly off, exulting in the freedom of the skies. “Soon,” she whispered, “soon I, too, will leave this place.” The thought left her oddly empty.

She finished her weaving—a soft, creamy wool which smelled of the fields and the sheep and the warm sun. The shepherd had only a coarse, bone needle but the stitches she took with it were fine and even and all the while she worked she heard the lark singing from the tree which stood outside the door.

It was done when the old man sickened. He had only a small cough at first, but within a day, he was much worse. His breath came in gasps. Sweat stood in beads on his fleshless skull.

“Can’t you do something? Have you no power to help him?” the shepherd asked.

“I was a healer once,” she said, staring into the fire, “at Lydney, at the shrine. There I might have helped your father, but here I can do so little.”

Caedmon watched her take the old man’s head on her lap. Holding him in her arms she said gently, “He will feel no pain. That much I can do. Soon he will be at peace.”

The old man began to cough again, weaker this time. The hours passed. He seemed to sleep. His breathing became more ragged until at last he shuddered and was still.

“He was not my father,” Caedmon said, “but I loved him nonetheless, though why I can not tell you.”

They buried him the next day, up on the hillside where the sheep grazed. When the shepherd bowed his head to pray, she stood still and unbending, listening to the lark singing in the tree above them.

That night, when they broke bread together, she looked at him and said, “I will leave in the morning.”

He poked at the fire. “The stars are out. It should be a good day for traveling.”

They sat in silence, watching the flames leap up in the small, dark room. At last, when he could stand it no longer, he said, “Will you go without telling me where? Will you come to my door, stay for a time, and then go as easily as that?”

“No,” she whispered, “not easily. But I must go.”

She told him then what she remembered, and the evil she had known faded and grew distant in the telling. She told him how men had fallen on the ancient shrine at Lydney during the mid-winter dark of the moon when she and Heraclia and old Telathial had been powerless—the Great Goddess gone from the land. That the Ancient One had returned she knew, but how she had freed herself and come to his door, she could not recall.

“What will you find when you return?” he asked when she had finished.

“I don’t know.” After a while she added, “I must go back, Caedmon.”

“Yes,” he said quietly, “if only to bury the others. When that is done—what then?”

“Then I will be alone.”

“You can’t stay there alone,” he said. “Haven’t you any family, any people who will take you back?”

“I am of the old tribes. There are so few left. They don’t want me back.” She spoke slowly, her eyes fixed in the distance, seeing scenes graven deep in her soul. “My father was not one of them. They say a child has no father, still they see his mark on my face.”

“And what of your father’s people?”

“My father’s people threw stones at me and drove me out. I was just a child.” After a while she said, half to herself, “Is it so bad to be alone?”

“There are worse things than being alone,” he said, “still ...”

“Do you want me to stay?” she asked softly.

He took her gently in his arms. She trembled but did not pull away. “There are some who don’t mind belonging to another, who ask only to be cared for. But not you, I think. You are too much like the lark. Once mended she had to be set free.”

“And yet she stays,” Anuvial whispered.

“Yes, she chooses to stay, but not because either of us asks her to. I won’t ask you to stay, Anuvial. Do what you have to do. When it is done, then you can choose—to come back here or to go on alone.”

“Will you wait for me,” she asked, “until I know?”

“I will wait,” he said.