



## The Weathercock :

As so often before, the small girl is sitting at her window: looking out, endlessly fascinated by the weather, the chimney pots, and the view across the harbour to the sea and the rocky islets beyond. She always looks sad: I've never seen her smile. I have the impression that she has no friends. But she's bright, very bright. I can tell by the way she looks over the rooftops at me. She can see that there is more to me than meets the eye. She keeps a watch on me - and my partner on the other side of the inlet - as though she's waiting for us to do something. One day we may, but she will have a long wait. A flash of reflected light is the most she can hope for, but not on a day like today.

The rain drummed against the window panes. Beryan stretched her hand and placed her fingertips against the glass. She felt the energy of the raindrops as they collided with the window. Raindrops that had plummeted from the dark layer of cloud overhanging the bay. She too would like to drop from the sky; to smash against some hard surface, but not to care; to yield and spread and gather up, to join a stream and run away unnoticed by the world of men. She could feel the rain: feel the joy of it. She took a deep breath in through her nose. It smelt

damp, it smelt clean, but it had a hint of earth, of seaweed, of mould. It was a smell of wet that was peculiar to that day. Other rainy days smelt different. This was a special day for rain. The beating raindrops had a vibration that appealed to her – this was a good day. She felt that she was more in touch with things today.

Across the roofs the weathercock, as always, stood proud on his church spire, and beyond him, in the distance across the inlet with its moored boats, stood his defiant spouse perched on her own steeple. The weathercock was made of gold, according to Beryan, even though he appeared a mottled, dark brown. She said his name was Wyman, though no one else seemed to think he had a name. When she was very little she had pointed out of the window and said “Wyman”. It was her very first word, even before “mummy”, according to her mother, who lost all affection for her daughter from that moment on.

‘How are you today, Wyman?’ the girl mouthed. He stood there, ineffable. Unflappable. Wyman never moved, not even in the strongest winds. How Beryan wished she was like him. Just standing there: battered by winds, hammered by gales, clenched by ice and frost – unmoved. Untroubled by people. Impervious to the taunts of little boys and the dead crabs that they threw.

The fishermen always gave Wyman a special salute before they set sail. She wondered what it would be like to be saluted. They gave him respect. They thought he brought them good luck, or protected them against the perils of the sea, or else they feared bad luck if they failed to perform their task.

Beryan had been observing the fishermen as they saluted. She had a direct view to the quayside from her window, but really it was too far away, so the previous day she had walked down to the harbour, found a corner amongst the stacks of old crab-pots and settled down in the shadows waiting for the fishermen to ready their boats. No one had noticed her there: she was good at making herself invisible.

At last they had departed and they had all made their salutes, though they were imprecise and cursory, making her feel as though they weren’t doing it properly. The last boat to leave was skippered by her Uncle Stanley and she could see that he took the matter more seriously. He had tapped the middle and ring fingers of his left hand against his brow and fluttered his hand from the wrist as he lowered it. He had then nodded at the weathercock. As he had approached the harbour entrance he performed a similar manoeuvre, this time with his right hand, towards the weathervane on the other side.

Beryan got down from her window seat and practised her salute in the mirror. She smiled. She thought it was almost as well executed as Uncle Stanley’s, so she returned to the window,

opened it, and saluted the weathercock. Nothing happened. Well, what did she expect? But she hoped he would be pleased at her first attempt.

She had a dream that night in which Wyman told her of his great sadness, because he had been separated from his partner for many, many centuries, and that all they could do was watch each other across the water that divided them: year after year, age after age.

In the morning she was woken by the golden rays of the rising sun. She flung the window open wide. She loved to look over the town on a morning like this when there was no one around. Beyond the ridges of damp slates, painted gold in the light, and way across the sea in the East, the sun was scaling the side of a distant cumulus: part of a mountain chain of clouds stretching across the horizon. Closer to home, she saw Wyman in silhouette, black against the golden sky. But, on this morning, he had company. A large black bird circled and fluttered around him. She could tell from the cronking sound that it was a raven, but she had never seen a raven act in such a way before. What was it doing - hovering in an ungainly fashion - in front of the weathercock? It was almost as though it was in conversation with him.

Beryan stretched and yawned, screwing up her eyes, wishing she had a spyglass to allow her a closer look. But as she drew in a deep breath of the early morning air, she was startled by a clinking noise. She opened her eyes to see the raven right in front of her on the windowsill with a small pebble in its beak, tapping it against the pane. It stopped and looked her. It cocked its head to one side: once, then twice, as if to say: 'Well then?' So she opened her left hand and the raven dropped the stone into her palm; bowed and then flew off. The words 'keep it for good luck' formed in her mind, unbidden.

A year passed. Beryan attended school, as before, but the things that they taught her seemed to miss the point, and the other children continued to avoid her. She consoled herself in books and by taking long walks along the beaches and the cliff tops.

She rarely saw her father now. He had joined the merchant navy and was away at sea for months at a time. Even when he was on leave, he found excuses to stay away from home.

One day Beryan found him on a distant beach sitting on a rock, staring out over the waves. He hugged her and said, 'Don't worry child, it's not your fault. You're not the reason I stay away. It's her. It's your mother. We're like chalk and cheese. We just can't get on. I can't be in the same room as her. You understand. I'm sorry. But you won't be here forever. One day you'll get away. You're a bright girl. Keep reading those books – you'll be at university in no time. You'll make a difference in the world, far away from this god-forsaken little village.'

But it was not the village that was the problem: it was the people in it.

It was summer now, and once the library had closed, rather than go back to the claustrophobia of her home, Beryan decided to take a long walk. She had argued with her mother that morning and it seemed that, if she failed to turn up for her supper, it could hardly make matters worse, and the fact of the matter was that she just couldn't face going back. So she walked and she walked: westward along the rocky beach, over the headland and further than she had ever walked before. She started to descend into a small valley and saw that there was a stone bridge spanning the stream at the bottom. She imagined she could hear singing, but could not be sure. As she neared the bridge she thought she could make out a figure leaning over the side, peering into the water, but the sun was setting now and it was hard to know if it was a person or just an accidental arrangement of shadows. Closer still and she could see that it was a boy standing there. She thought of turning back, but boys were generally all right with her when they were alone; it was when they were in twos and threes that they were horrible. And besides, this lad seemed different from the others. He looked up and then stood in front of her. He was strikingly beautiful: tall and lean, yet powerful. She caught her breath. He had thick black hair and, in the failing light, he had deep, dark eyes that seemed to have no whites. He was singing gently. It was a strange tune and, although he was directly in front of her, it had a distant sound as though drifting across a lake. He smiled at her and held out his hand.

Beryan was not used to physical contact and shrank back. She stared at his hand: dark hair grew on the back of it, and his veins pulsed. She looked at his face but found she could not focus on him. She suddenly felt dizzy and started to lose her balance. The boy stepped forward to catch her, but she jumped back. There was ringing in her ears, tingling in her fingers, and her chest tightened so that she felt she could not breathe. But then she saw a flash of light in the corner of her vision. It came from the direction of her village, back along the coast. She looked towards it and realised that it was the setting sun reflecting from the weathercock on the church. The thought of Wyman steadied her, and she stood more solidly. The boy stopped singing.

Now she sniffed the air. This was one of the many things about Beryan that the other children found strange and one of the reasons they shunned her. But the boy on the bridge was different: he smiled and sniffed in turn. He extended his hand, slowly turning it, and held out a stem of purple flowers to her. She recognised it as vipers bugloss, one of her favourite cliff-top plants. An exchange of gifts, she thought, and she felt in her pocket, but as she touched her pebble, the words "not him" formed in her mind.

Another flash of light caught her attention, and she suddenly felt alive as if waking from a dream. She looked towards the bridge, but the boy had gone. She sniffed the air, but his scent had faded. She listened, but his song was more distant - more distant than ever. Down on the beach something caught her eye. It was a black goat standing on a rock.

She must get back. The light was fading and the tide was coming in. So she set off eastwards. She climbed back up the hill, and then down to the beach again, leaping from rock to rock. She imagined that there was a raven ahead of her: it flew a few yards, landed, then flew again. It guided her back to the village through the shattered coastline and the incoming waves.

More years passed and Beryan had come home for her university vacations. Her mother would not have her in the house, so she was staying with Uncle Stanley. Her uncle did not exactly like her, let alone love her, in fact she rather unnerved him, but he knew that his brother, her father, had loved her in his way, and he believed that it was his duty to look after her.

Beryan was studying Archaeology with Anthropology. Although her main focus was on Bronze Age Mesopotamia she also had an interest in mythology. Apart from an enormous reading list, she had to complete two long essays over the summer vacation, one of which was on the topic of the folklore traditions of her own home town. She immediately thought of the weathervanes and decided that she could ask her uncle about them and the traditions that surrounded them.

'Why do you salute him like that?' she asked.

'Don't know. That's how we always done it. Good luck, I suppose.'

That was all the information he had to offer, so it was not long before Beryan returned to the only place that she had ever felt truly at home: the library. She had only been away for a year, but somehow it seemed smaller, dingier and dustier. She sifted through the Local Interest section and eventually found a single, slim volume on the folklore of the area hiding at the back amongst the cobwebs. It was written by someone called Selena Lamacraft. This was an unusual name and she wondered if this was the same person as the 'Mad-Woman Lamacraft', that all the children at school had despised and feared.

'Oh, yes, that's her,' said Uncle Stanley when she had asked.

'Is she really mad?' asked Beryan.

'How should I know?' he said. 'I don't have nothin' to do with her.'

'Did you go to school with her? What was she like?'

'Oh no. Didn't go to school with her, not me. She was an old woman even then. Livin' alone in that old cottage in the woods. Always been old, she has. Steer clear of her we do.' And that was all he had to say on the subject. 'Goin' down the pub now. Feed the cat, before you go to be bed.'

The following morning Beryan awoke with a start. She thought she had heard a cock crow, but when she came to her senses all she could hear was her uncle snoring loudly in the room below. She must have dreamt it: there had never been cockerels in the village as the local people considered them to be bad luck. She wondered if there was an explanation in the book.

It was early, but she was restless, so she got up and looked out of the window. She couldn't see Wyman from her uncle's house and somehow that made her uneasy. So she was soon dressed and out of the door with her folklore book in her hand. As soon she could see the weathercock she gave him the salute, and one for his partner too.

She wandered a long way down the beach till she finally came to the rock where she had last seen her father. She jumped up onto it and took a deep breath. Odd smell in the air today. Something that reminded her of the distant past: a long lost episode in her early childhood perhaps. Something ancient. It was a warm morning, but she shivered.

She opened the book. It had a frontispiece. Oh dear, a hand-drawn illustration of some fairies around a well, and not very well executed. It was signed by the author. Doesn't bode well for the rest of the book, she thought. The first chapter was on the subject of fairies – not a good start. She found it generalised, wishy-washy and somewhat credulous, with virtually no local references and nothing at all that she could use as material for her essay. But the next chapter, on hauntings, discussed some specific local cases, some within living memory, and she thought that there might be something that she could use, especially if she could cross-reference it with the archives of the local newspapers. The section on medicinal plants was too general, but the next chapter on nature spirits was of more interest. It seemed that centuries ago the villagers had believed some of the local coves were inhabited by 'buccas': entities that could change their shape to appear as either animals or as humans. On particular days in the year, offerings would be placed on certain sacred stones to placate them. Although some of these creatures were benevolent, some of them were not. Beryan wondered where these

rocks might be and whether she was sitting on one right now. She placed her left palm on it and waited. Yes, she thought, there seemed to be some sort of power in there.

At last the book mentioned the weathervanes and the sailors' tradition of saluting them. It said that they had always pointed in the same direction and that once in the thirteenth century a local priest had been determined to oil them. But he had fallen to his death. And then, in the fifteen hundreds, an alchemist had decided that they were made of gold, so he had also tried to scale one of the steeples: but he had died too. No one had attempted it since. Locals said they were cursed. They *are* cursed, said the author, but they are also the guardians of the harbour. Occasionally they are heard to crow, and it is a warning of an impending calamity.

The section on the weathervanes was rather short and Beryan had the feeling that Selina Lamacraft knew a lot more than she was willing to put into print. She wondered if the author knew the weathercock's name.

She felt a stiff breeze on her face. She looked up and was puzzled to see red clouds on the horizon. Could it be that late already? She looked at her watch, but it was not even midday.

She turned the book in her hands and wondered if there was enough to use for her long essay. Maybe there was, but she would still need to find other sources and do some cross-referencing. If only the author had given some dates, she might have been able to research the archives of the local papers and look up, for instance, the mysterious death and haunting at Manorcroft Farm mentioned in chapter two.

Beryan made a decision: she would visit the author today at her cottage in the woods. Maybe the old lady would have an affinity with her: they were both outsiders after all. Maybe they would get along just fine. And even if she was mad, or a homicidal maniac, she was old and probably frail, so Beryan felt she should be able to defend herself.

From her childhood wanderings Beryan knew there was a rough path near here, used by wild deer, which struck up into the under-cliffs from a point between two large boulders at the back of the beach. After crossing a few fields at the top, she imagined that she would then be able to scramble down into the wooded valley to Miss Lamacraft's house. She was in the mood for exploring and didn't really care if she got lost, so she set off up the track.

After an hour clambering over rocks and through bramble thickets, and then down through a dense wood, she finally arrived at the stony lane that weaved its way up into the narrow valley. She was hot and sweaty and her forearms were cut by thorns, but she was happy. She had discovered several wild flowers that she had never seen before and was looking forward to

asking Miss Lamacraft about them. She turned left and followed the lane upwards through the trees. She noticed a black cat watching her from a limestone outcrop.

The track was in a poor state of repair: there was grass growing in the middle and there were numerous potholes. She wondered how long it had been since anyone had visited the place or whether the postman ever ventured up here. But after a while she saw a thatched roof, a stone wall, then a garden and an old lady leaning on the gate staring at her.

'Hello my name's Beryan.'

'I know. I've been waiting for you.'

'How did you know?'

'Saw you coming.'

She didn't look mad, thought the girl. She was dressed in clean clothes and she had a well-tended garden. She seemed quite forthright, but not mad. Old certainly, but she wasn't dribbling or wielding an axe. There were plenty of scarier people than her living in the village.

'Would you like to come in? I've got the kettle on ... and scones.'

'Oh yes, that would be great. Thank you. But I'm in a bit of a mess, I'm afraid.'

'Oh, don't you worry about that.'

Inside the cottage was dark, but well ordered and no sign of cobwebs as far as Beryan could see. Neither were there spinning wheels, nor broomsticks. But no television or computers either.

'No reception down here in the valley,' said the old woman, as if reading her mind, and walking in with a china teapot in a crocheted tea cosy. 'But I can manage perfectly well without such things.' And, after she had brought in a plate of scones, the old lady settled down opposite to observe the young woman as she tucked in.

'Did you make the scones yourself?'

'Oh yes.'

'Did you make the jam too?'



'Yes, I did.'

'They're delicious.'

'Well, thank you, but don't take all day, we've got a lot to do.'

'We have?'

'Yes, we have.'

'Well yes, I was going to ask you about the wildflowers in the wood, and about the haunting at Manorcroft Farm. I have a long essay to write over the summer vacations, you see.'

'At university, are you? Bright girl. Good for you: you've escaped from the village.'

Beryan shrugged. 'Yes, I've escaped.'

'The people around here don't like you, do they? Keep away from you. I know what that feels like. I can see you're not like all the other stupid girls in the village with no imagination and no ambition, stuck in that place for the rest of their lives. You've done well to get away when you had the chance.'

'You're right, I don't like the people and they don't like me. But I feel like it's me that belongs here, not them. I love this place. I love every tree, every rock and every stream. I feel like I'm part of the landscape around here, if you can understand what I mean. I have some kind of deep connection with it. Don't get me wrong. I love university too: I've made friends there - people I feel in tune with. I've never had friends before. But I could never stay away too long - I think I might die if I did.'

The old lady extended her right hand and stretched out her fingers. Beryan did likewise with her left hand, so that their fingertips touched for a few moments.

'Yes, you're right, you do belong here,' she said. 'Now, I can tell you about the flowers and the hauntings, but those aren't the things you're really interested in, are they? What is it that you really want to know?'

'Well, the thing is ... I'd really like to know about the weathervanes.'

'The weathervanes. I see. You'd like to know about the weathervanes. Are you sure you don't know all about them already?' Beryan's eyes widened. 'Now tell me, the one on this side of the harbour, what's his name?'

'Wyman,' said Beryan.

'Wyman, yes that's his name. Very good. And what about the other one?'

'I've never known her name.'

'But you know that she's a she, don't you?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Come on now, what's her name?'

A word formed in Beryan's mind. 'Wilona,' she said. 'Her name's Wilona.'

'Very good. Wilona. And do you know what their names mean?'

'Actually, I did look up "Wyman" and it's a Saxon word that means "the hunter".'

'Yes, he's the hunter, and Wilona is a Saxon word that means 'longed for'. You see, the Saxons had an inkling about the true nature of our friends. A few even knew exactly what they really are. But, of course, all that was ruined when the Normans came. All that knowledge was lost. Well: nearly lost.'

'Please, Miss Lamacraft, can you tell me all about them?'

'"Mrs", if you don't mind.'

'I'm sorry, I didn't realise you had a husband.'

'A long time ago now. Anyway. What else do you want to know about them? OK, which direction do they point?'

'Towards Jerusalem. That's what my father always said, and my uncle, and the information sheet in the church.'

'And were they correct?'

'No, it never seemed right to me.'

'So where are they pointing?'

'Beyond Jerusalem.'

'Yes?'

A picture formed in Beryan's mind, somewhat like an aerial image. She floated over the Mediterranean and over Jerusalem, and words formed in her mouth out of nowhere.

'Ur ... in Sumeria,' she said.

'See. You did know.'

'Is that where they came from?'

'Five thousand years ago, yes it was, but they were from somewhere else before that.'

'Where was that?'

'I don't know, I can't reach back any further. You might be able to one day.'

Beryan experienced a strange sensation on her scalp, like raindrops. She ran her hand through her hair, but it was not wet. She suddenly felt the closeness of the room and walked to the window. The sky had become heavy - overcast with clouds that seemed to glow with a purple light. A gust of wind caught the window and she grabbed it to stop it slamming. She took a deep breath.

'I've never smelt a day like this before,' she said. 'I don't like it.'

'I don't either: something is up. Something is definitely up. Well you knew that, you heard Wyman crowing this morning, didn't you? Something bad is coming and I'm very glad you came. You could have decided not to, you know. It wasn't written in stone. But thank the god's you are here, because the Adversary is on his way and we will have to deal with him,' said Selina Lamacraft.

'Who is the Adversary?'

'No time to explain that now: you'll find out in time. We've got to hurry. Are you good on the sea? We've got a little boat trip to undertake.'

'But it'll take us at least an hour to get down to the shore.'

'No it won't. It will take about five minutes. There's a secret tunnel you see.'

'There is?'

'No, of course there isn't, I've got a car, now come along.'

Mrs Lamacraft's car was a bright red E-Type Jaguar.

'You look surprised,' said the old lady. 'I suppose you were expecting a donkey or a battered old Morris Minor at best. Well, you're privileged and I hope you feel honoured, because I don't let many people see my E-Type, let alone ride in it. I'm a bit of a petrol-head on the sly, you see.'

Somehow they seemed to glide straight over all the potholes in the lane and they quickly arrived in the village. No one paid any attention to them as they pulled up at the quayside.

'It's as if no one can see us,' said Beryan.

'It's called hiding in plain sight. People like us are good at that.' She pointed at an old clinker-built rowing boat. 'Good, here it is. Are you any good at rowing?'

'Not bad, I suppose, but where are we going?'

'You'll see.'

The old woman led the way down some old, slippery, stone steps, and jumped into the boat, which hardly seemed to rock at all. 'In you get, and don't forget to salute as we leave the harbour.'

The sky was still darkening: a sickly yellow now. The wind was rising. Ropes slapped hard against the masts of moored dinghies: chattering like giant teeth. Beryan pulled hard at the oars, while the old lady fumbled in her handbag.

'That's a relief,' she said, 'I thought I'd left it behind. Now, where were we? Yes, you wanted to know where we are going. Well don't worry, it's not far ... Have you heard of the chapel under the sea?'

'Yes, the fishermen say there is a church on the sea bed.' Beryan spoke loudly to make herself heard above the wind. 'And that - if you hear its bell tolling - there is bad fortune on the way. My father said he heard it once.'

'No, he didn't, he must have imagined it: the last time it rang was in 1864.'

'So you're saying there really is a chapel under the sea?'

'Temple more like.'

They stopped a couple of hundred yards beyond the harbour entrance. They could hear the bell tolling beneath the waves. The raven hovered directly above, so that they knew they were in exactly the right spot. Selena withdrew something from her bag, but Beryan couldn't see what it was. She did what she often did in stressful situations and clutched the pebble in her pocket – her lucky charm. After a minute of waiting, there was a sudden break in the clouds and a shaft of light reflected off both the weathervanes, one each side of the harbour entrance, and they shone intensely for several seconds.

The waves froze and the sea glowed translucent green. The water had become like glass and they could see the temple below them in the depths, a golden object at its apex.

The old lady stood up in the boat and looked at the sky. She uttered a few words in a strange language before taking the young woman's hand. She led her through the motionless waves back to the shore.

When Beryan woke, she was lying on her father's rock by the sea. The sky was clear blue, and the bright sunlight was hot on her face. She wondered how long she had been asleep and hoped that her skin hadn't burned. She felt most refreshed and her thoughts seemed to have an unusual clarity. She decided she must leave the village immediately. Her best friend at university had said that she could stay with her for the summer at her home in Cardiganshire - so why not? She would say goodbye to Uncle Jack and go today.

So Beryan left for Wales, met her friend's brother, fell in love, had children, and for many years didn't think very much about her childhood home at all.

Then one day she received a letter from a firm of solicitors based in the South West. It said that her mother had died, but Beryan was not upset - if anything she felt relief. The funeral was not going to be held in either of the churches beside the harbour, but in the big parish church in the market town a few miles away. She had no desire to attend, but her husband insisted that it was her duty. He would stay at home and look after the kids.

As she walked from the car park towards the church, she felt faint and slightly nauseous. She had arrived deliberately late, hoping to slip in and stand at the back, unnoticed. Approaching the church, she saw a red E-Type Jaguar parked in the street right in front of the lych gate. On its bonnet there was a black cat - curled up, but alert. It followed her with its eyes as she drew near. It allowed her to stroke it and purred, before springing off and walking straight up the path between the gravestones and through the open south door of the church. Beryan followed.

She entered the church halfway along the nave, expecting all heads to turn disapprovingly, but no one noticed and she made her way quietly to the back to sit on the end of the last pew.

She reached for a hymn book, but her wrist was grabbed. She jumped and shouted, but no one turned around.

'You won't be needing that,' said Selena 'Lamacraft. She turned the younger woman's hand in hers and placed a pebble in it. 'But you will be needing this one day.' It was the same size and weight as Beryan's own pebble but black and veined with white.

'What is it?'

'It's yours. Your father left it to you when he died, but your mother got her hands on it and has clung on to it ever since. She was never going to give it to you, and I was afraid she might find some way of destroying it, so a few weeks ago, when I was certain she was going to die, I popped along to persuade her to give it up to me.'

'Did she need much persuading?'

'Yes,' said the old woman, making it clear she had nothing more to say on the matter.

'Did she suffer much?'

'What her? Not much. Kept on drinking to the end.'

Beryan put the pebble in her bag before looking back at her friend. 'But you're looking well. You don't look a year older.'

'Healthy lifestyle. A good diet and plenty of exercise chasing round the woods for my grub.'

At the solicitor's the following day it transpired that there was nothing left of the estate except for the bare bones of the house, which had been left to a distant cousin: a young woman with a baby daughter. But she seemed nice enough and Beryan didn't begrudge her.

Yet more years passed and Beryan had become Professor of Assyriology at a Scottish university. One day a package arrived on her desk. She was expecting a Sumerian clay tablet from a colleague in Berlin. He had his doubts about its authenticity and had asked for her opinion. But the parcel seemed too light and the stamps were wrong. It wasn't from Germany: it was from the South West of England. Inside there was a pebble, exactly the same in size and weight as the other two, but white and veined with gold. There was no note of explanation, but none was needed. Beryan made a few quick arrangements to cover her lectures, a few apologies, and within half an hour she was in her car travelling south.

She had travelled all night and was nearing the end of her journey. The sun had risen a while ago and she was looking forward to seeing the view out to sea as she drove over the brow of the ridge behind her village, but the valley was full of sea fog – a 'fret' as they called it in this part of the world. She pulled into a muddy lay-by in front of a farm gate and got out to stretch and gather her thoughts. She didn't know whether it was because she had been awake all night, but she felt light-headed and charged with a strange electricity. Wooded hill-tops floated in rich green shades above the white, billowing blanket of the fret. There was a slight breeze fresh with a hint of kelp and something else which she couldn't quite define. She had never smelt a day like this before and could not tell if it was good or bad.

Three ravens hung above the whiteness: perfectly still except for the occasional flutter of a wingtip feather. One of them peeled off and settled on a branch of the ancient oak tree in the middle of the field. It seemed to beckon her, so Beryan climbed over the gate and followed it: across the grass and down into the fog, to the field's edge and into the wood, through the trees and the bluebells and down to the lane, and along the lane to the cottage. There was no black cat waiting to greet her this time. She let herself in.

Selena Lamacraft was sitting up in bed supported by a vast array of embroidered cushions. Her skin was translucent and papery white. She had lost a lot of weight and she could barely move, but her eyes were glinting: as alive as ever.

'Sit down dear, good to see you.'

'Good to see you too.' Beryan reached out and held her hand. 'Is it time for me to take over?'

'Yes, it's your time now.'

'What about my husband and the children?'

'Oh, don't you worry about them. You're not obliged to stay within the wood all day every day, you know. You can still visit them once in a while. You can take the Jag - it will be much quicker than your old crate: it's yours now ... as is the cottage ... and of course the pebbles. You've got all three of them now, so the job is officially yours. But there is one final thing that I would like you to do for me.'

So Beryan scooped up the old woman - as light as a feather - into her arms. She carried her outside and placed her in the car. She drove down the lane through the thick fog and through the village to the harbour. She lifted Selena out of the car and then down the steps and into the boat. She rowed passed the moored boats, only pausing briefly to salute the weathervanes. As they reached the mirror-flat open sea, the fog lifted and the sun emerged. The old lady touched Beryan's arm and pointed weakly at the furthest of three tiny rocky islands a little way down the coast. The rock was perfectly reflected in the still water and there seemed to be a goat standing at its summit.

They stopped just short of the islet. She lifted Selena from the boat and placed her on the water where she lay outstretched with a broad smile on her face. Beryan could not remember seeing anyone look that content before.

Even though the sea was completely still, she could only just make out Selena's whispered words. 'Thank you, my dear, I am very happy. Now, you may go.'

As she approached the harbour entrance, Beryan turned back to see the dark silhouettes of a goat and a cat standing at the islet's edge. She thought she could hear a distant tune drifting across the water: a strange, forgotten melody that she had heard once before: a long, long time ago.



There's a new girl sitting at the window looking across the roof-tops at me today. A bit happier than the last one, I'm pleased to say. She already knows my name, and Wilona's. She's made friends with the raven and I don't suppose it will be long before she learns the salute.

Look, she's waving at me.



word count: 6489 words

© Dave Wicken 2017