

Washing Clean in the Shee Water

Katie San Filippo

There once was a young woman who lived out among the heather and the sheep near Spittal of Glenshee. She arrived on a Tuesday, showing up with a moving lorry outside one of the old blackhouses.

Ronald, who ran one of the B&B's in Spittal, claimed to have seen the lorry taking the winding A93 in from the north. He set up in The Lion and Spear, Old Bridget's pub—guaranteed to be free of tourists—and began answering questions, taking a pint of the local draught in payment. By seven he was thoroughly drunk and Old Bridget was thoroughly done. She sent him home with his neighbor Ian and stern instructions to take some paracetamol and drink a glass of water.

Her barman, Elspet, watched her make her rounds, joking and laughing with the locals. Bridget's smile faded as she walked back over.

“What news,” Elspet asked.

“Ron's been busy. Everyone knows which blackhouse she's taken and which moving company she used and what color her hair is.”

Elspet grinned, “And what color is it?”

They ducked their head, laughing as she swatted at them, and went back to cutting lemons. Old Bridget sighed and tapped her fingers rhythmically on the wooden bar.

“Brown. It's brown. And she's in the old Beira blackhouse.”

Elspet paused, almost imperceptibly, before continuing their cutting.

“I didn't know the hag was selling.”

“Neither did I.”

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By Thursday, the young woman had been spotted walking along the Shee Water, taking the bus down to the Tesco in Blairgowrie, and chasing a tabby cat that had streaked out of her front door when Old Bridget stopped by to welcome her to the village.

The graying woman stood blinking, awkwardly holding her pot of Cullen Skink. The girl had left the front door open, and Old Bridget could see the living room through it. Empty boxes were stacked up just inside the door and the cold stone floor was covered in soft-looking blue and yellow rugs. A green velvet couch was tucked into the alcove underneath the small window directly across the room from the entrance.

She started at the crunching footsteps behind her. The young woman was coming back up the drive, grumpy tabby firmly in hand. She crooked a smile at Old Bridget.

“Sorry about that, Alexander here is still getting used to the new place.”

The cat in question made a grumbling noise as she plopped him back inside. She shut the door firmly as she turned back towards Old Bridget, ignoring the yowl of protest.

“Now! What can I do for you?”

The older woman smiled.

“Just wanted to welcome you to the village and bring you some hearty fare. I don’t know if you’re used to the colder nights we get up here. I’m Old Bridget, I own the pub in town.”

“Ahh, you’re the one in charge around here then,” the girl grinned, taking the offered pot from Old Bridget’s hands. “I’m well used to the chill, but I’ll never turn down good food. I’m Deirdre.”

“Welcome to GlenShee then, Deirdre.”

Saturday morning showed the usual suspects trickling into the pub for hearty breakfasts and hot drinks to ward off the ever-present chill in the air. Elspet was on coffee duty, their long blonde hair braided and twisted up out of their face. Beneath the hum of the coffee grinder, Old Bridget leaned in and whispered what they'd learned on Thursday.

Elspet eyed her, "Deirdre. Are you serious?"

"Aye. The girl doesn't look like the original though."

Elspet snorted, "Yeah, because you're such a blacksmith yourself, hm?"

"Shush you, you know we all bring something with us when we change."

The older woman tugged meaningfully at a wisp of hair that had escaped Elspet's bun. The blonde rolled their eyes in response.

The first body showed up two weeks after Deirdre's arrival. The tourist was found in the heather near a local beekeeper's hives. His socks and boots were next to the little brook that ran through the property; he seemed to have dozed off while soaking his feet. He was in short sleeves. The local constable, Keith, trailed by a young man with a camera, sighed and wrote it off as natural causes; the villagers shook their heads at the folly of outsiders hiking without precautions.

The second body showed up one week after the first. This tourist was found in a pasture by a shepherd investigating why his flock wouldn't go near their pond. There was no blood, no wounds.

Constable Keith shook his head and wrote it off as another tourist wandering where they shouldn't on a cold night. A certain local source reported seeing Keith turn towards the

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young man with the camera and lecture him on proper Highland attire. The victim had been found without a sweater. The villagers decided to update the website to remind outsiders of appropriate winter clothing choices.

The third body showed up three days later. The tourist, like the other two, was only in a thin shirt. This time though, Keith called in backup: the tourist had been stabbed.

Deirdre had found the body when walking back from the Shee Water. According to Ronald, she told the Blairgowrie police that she originally thought the tourist had been taking a nap under one of the trees when she'd passed him that morning. It was only upon returning and noticing he hadn't moved hours later that she suspected differently and got close enough to see the bloodstains.

Old Bridget had taken her car down to the Blairgowrie police station to pick up Deirdre after the girl answered all the officers' questions—the pub owner hadn't wanted her to have to wait for the Wednesday bus. Elspet was in charge of the pub, drawing pints while keeping an eye on the door, waiting for their arrival. Ronald, of course, had set up again at the corner table, a rapt audience surrounding him.

"Poor lass! My mate Danno who works the phones at the station said she was real broken up about it, just weeping away, she was." Ronald paused in his storytelling to accept another pint from one of his adoring listeners.

"Apparently she went through the station's whole box of tissues and Keith's new photographer boy had to run out and get her more. Although Danno said that was more to stop the lad from staring at her too much. You'd think he'd never seen a crying woman before!"

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His audience shook their heads.

Ronald continued on, "Course you've got to take Danny Boy with a sprinkling of salt if you get my meaning. Why, he was always saying our old Beira was a hag! Beira, the kind woman who used to hand out those little carved stone figures every Spring! Ridiculous man."

Elspet rolled their eyes from where they were wiping down one of the tables. They eyed Ronald's swaying form and the rumbling vibrations of an avid crowd and decided to call it.

"Oi Ronald! If I have to hear one more line about this gruesome mess I'll be weeping myself! Where's your good neighbor, eh? Time for you to stagger on home."

Ian appeared at his side like he'd been waiting for the call. Ronald started and then scowled, "Alright alright, I know where I'm not wanted. No need to get the missus."

Ian shot Elspet a long-suffering look and then bundled Ronald off the stool and towards the front door, pint glass still in his hand.

"I'll get the glass back to you later then Elspet."

"Ta Ian, good luck with him."

The door shut behind the two men and the crowd Ronald had attracted dispersed grumbling, taking their pints back to various booths and tables.

Just in time too; Elspet spotted Old Bridget poke her head out around the door to the back and began making their way over.

"How is she?" they asked in a low voice.

Old Bridget shrugged, mouth twisting, "Come keep her company—she needs somebody young that she doesn't have to be polite to."

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Elspet nodded and tossed their rag into the bucket. Slipping past Bridget, they followed the sound of sniffing to the back office of the pub. Deirdre sat on the old overstuffed couch clutching a tissue in her hand, her round face drawn with sorrow. Elspet hesitated and then knocked softly.

“Y’know, I’m pretty sure that couch has been in here since before Thatcher.”

Deirdre looked up with a start and then giggled, “It does smell like it, doesn’t it?”

Elspet returned the smile, entering the room and holding out their hand, “I’m Elspet, they/them pronouns if you don’t mind.”

“Deirdre, she/her. It’s nice to meet you.” She sniffled. “Wish it were under better circumstances.”

Elspet grimaced in sympathy. They looked around the sad office and then back at the sad girl.

“Tell you what, being here isn’t going to make you feel any better. Want me to walk you home?”

Deirdre nodded gratefully.

Elspet jotted a quick note to Old Bridget and then the two snuck out the back staff entrance. They started up the alleyway to the walking trails which would lead them on to Deirdre’s blackhouse. They walked in silence for a bit, Deirdre looking up at the stars and Elspet rubbing their hands together. The young woman broke the silence first.

“So. Why is she called *Old* Bridget? She can’t be more than fifty, *maybe* sixty.”

Elspet laughed.

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“She’s older than she looks, don’t let her fool you. But no, she came here a while ago to take over the pub from a family friend of hers and started doling out advice and offering a safe space for those who needed it.”

They paused for air as the two reached the top of the hill where the road split away from the trails.

“But yeah, a bunch of us young folk started following her around because of that. There was a young girl also called Bridget, and she called the other Old Bridget once as a joke after the Elder wouldn’t stop mothering her. Except Old Bridget herself loved it and wouldn’t let the little one call her anything different. By the time Little Bridget left for uni, the name had stuck enough that that’s just what everyone calls her now.”

Deirdre laughed as she unlocked her front door, already sticking a foot through to keep her cat from escaping.

“That’s actually so sweet.”

“Yeah well, Old Bridget is a good one. She was the first person I came out to and she really helped me find my community. Gave me a job when I was struggling. Y’know. She’s good people.”

Elspet crouched to wiggle their fingers at Alexander, who was not convinced. He remained under the green velvet couch, luminous eyes catching the moonlight. Elspet sighed and stood back up. Deirdre smiled hesitatingly at them.

“Would you like a cup of tea?”

The blonde smiled at her.

“That sounds perfect.”

Elspet jerked awake. Alexander stared at them from the arm of the couch where Elspet had fallen asleep, slumped over and still clutching their empty mug. Elspet stared back at him for a moment, frozen, until they heard it again. It was quiet, no more than a murmur, and came from the only bedroom. The sound was sweet and sad and the hair on the back of Elspet's neck rose. They stood and crept closer to the bedroom, opening the door and peeking around it.

Deirdre was standing next to the small window, a green silk robe wrapped around her plump shoulders. She swayed back and forth in the moonlight and let out another mournful keening, beautiful and terrible at the same time. Elspet wanted to run away. They wanted to wrap her in blankets. They wanted to do anything to stop the sound. They never wanted to hear anything else again.

Suddenly, a dark blur rushed into the room. Alexander sprinted over to his owner and began to meow insistently, twining around her ankles. The quiet wailing cut off, and Elspet, freed, shrunk back into the shadow of the doorframe.

"Alexander?"

Deirdre sounded groggy. Her cat meowed again, almost screeching. She slumped out of the rigid stance and groaned. She shuffled back over to her bed and sank into it, pulling the duvet back up. Alexander jumped on top of her and began kneading into her hip, purring loudly.

Elspet closed the door soundlessly.

"Keening?"

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“Aye. Never heard anything like it. It was the most beautiful and awful noise I’ve ever heard.”

Old Bridget ran her hand through her hair and pulled at it in thought. Elspet continued sweeping, periodically blowing their escaping hair out of their face. Old Bridget watched them, mind turning slowly.

“You didn’t know what you were, back before I found you.”

Elspet looked up, frowning, “No. Just knew I couldn’t leave when all my friends did. Not because I didn’t want to but. Well. You know.”

Old Bridget nodded, fingers tapping on the bar. Elspet stopped sweeping and watched her.

“You think she’s one of my folk, not yours.”

“Aye.”

Elspet hissed through their teeth, brow furrowed, “Well that changes things.”

Elspet kept an eye out for Deirdre over the next few days, but the woman stayed holed up in her cottage. They did manage to run into Keith and his tag-along while walking by the Shee that Tuesday afternoon. Keith was in fine form as usual, pointing out various plants along the path and crowing at the sight of a mountain hare bounding across the moor. His companion had the dead-eyed look of someone who had been dragged along against their will. Both perked up at the sight of the bartender.

“Hoh there! Alright Elspet?”

They nodded at the constable, “Alright Keith. Who’s your friend there?”

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Keith grinned, "Ah this strapping young man is my nephew, Sean! He's up from the Hebrides to intern as my police photographer."

His smile faded, "Of course, I didn't plan on there being so much to photograph this past month."

Elspet grimaced in sympathy, "I don't think anyone planned on this happening. I'm sorry you're having to experience this first-hand Sean."

The boy shrugged, scuffing the toe of his boot against the ground.

Keith, frowning at the bridge ahead of them, spoke up again, "Elspet, your eyes are better than mine, is that the young Miss Abhainn over there?"

Both the bartender and the photographer jerked their heads up. There was a green spot on the bridge ahead of them that solidified as they drew closer. It was indeed Deirdre, bundled up in a long coat. She was staring off into the distance, body turned towards the old church and still except for the wisps of hair escaping the black scarf on her head.

Sean pulled ahead of the other two, blank look replaced with hope. The bartender lengthened their own stride to pass him. Reaching the bridge, they stomped loudly on the wood as they walked forward. Deirdre flinched, a full-body twitch that made Elspet reach out and grasp her arm to keep her from falling over the railing.

"Alright there darling?"

Deirdre blinked hard, staring up at the blonde. Her lips quirked, "My knight in woolen armor."

Elspet blushed and stuttered, for once thankful when Keith's booming baritone broke the quiet between them.

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“Miss Abhainn! How fortunate that our paths cross yet again!”

The two turned as one towards the constable and his shadow. Deirdre’s smile dropped from her eyes, although her mouth kept up the charade. “Ah, Constable, Mr. Drochclive, how are you both today?”

The photographer grinned, jumping forward to shake her hand, “Miss Deirdre we meet again!”

Elspet could feel Deirdre’s tension ratchet up with each word Sean spoke. Her smile was looking more and more like a grimace; Sean seemed to have taken no notice, chattering on about the “great photos I got, seriously the light up here is exquisite.”

A splash and a loud “Shite!” interrupted him. Deirdre quickly pulled her hand away as Sean turned towards his uncle, who was sheepishly leaning over the rail.

“Ah, pardon my language; I’ve just managed to drop my phone into the Shee like an idiot.”

Sean groaned, “Uncle Keith, that’s the fourth phone you’ve lost this month.”

“Now, now, it’s not gone yet! I can still see it on the bottom. Perhaps if I had a fantastic nephew who would deign to put his youthfulness to work...” The constable trailed off meaningfully. The younger man groaned and began to take off his socks and shoes. He paused, and then took off his sweater and held it out to Deirdre hopefully, “Miss Deirdre, if you would be so kind to keep this for me while I rescue my uncle, I’d much appreciate it.”

He walked away towards the end of the bridge without waiting for her reply. Elspet snorted, shaking their head and watching as he began arguing with his uncle over where exactly the phone had been dropped. The blonde turned towards Deirdre, about to ask if she wanted to

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make an escape while they were busy, only to find the woman was not where she had been a moment before. An eerie humming began to drown out the sound of the Shee. Elspet whirled around and caught sight of the woman in green making her way down towards the water, staring down at the sweater in her hands. She began to sing.

Elspet felt herself freeze unwillingly, caught in horror as the constable shoved his nephew into the water and drew a long knife from underneath his coat.

The singing faded into the background as Elspet caught sight of Keith's face. Hunger. Black hunger, empty and yawning in the dark. Elspet could hardly breathe. It had been two centuries since a Hunter had made its way into their Glen, protected as they were by the standing stone on the hill behind the old church. And now one came in the form of the village's own constable. They had poured his drinks, cooked him breakfast, helped him home when he blacked out on the anniversary of his wife's death. And all this time, he had been waiting for the perfect moment to attack.

He stood between Deirdre and the water, knife pointed and placed on her chest. She swayed back and forth; the otherworldly singing came to a halt. Her mouth opened and a voice with two thousand years of history behind it spoke, "We meet at last, Hunter. What knowledge of mortality do you seek?"

The Hunter's rictus smile grew.

The Old Beira had kept to herself for the most part, tucked away in her blackhouse on the hill. She had been, by definition, an old woman, and she blamed her bones and the cold whenever someone teased her about her hermitage.

But there were two times a year she was guaranteed to emerge from her cottage and make her way down the hill into the village: the beginning and the end of Summer. There were only two seasons for the Beira, Summer and Winter, and she made sure to celebrate both. She would set up shop below the standing stone and hand out carved stone figures to anyone who stopped by. “You’re meant to protect them and cherish them,” she’d tell any who asked about them, “and maybe one day they’ll return the favor.” And then she would cackle, bringing a swift end to the conversation.

Old Beira was not afraid to embody a stereotype.

It had been a bittersweet moment when the old hag had moved on, brought farther North by the same Call that all of the Folk felt at some point in their lives. Elspet had just figured out who and what they were, had finally been introduced to the mirror society that walked the same cobblestone streets as everyone else, and felt robbed once again of the past possibilities. Old Bridget had brought them along to say farewell at her going away party.

The Hag had gone quiet and peered at them; Elspet felt a twanging on their thread of fortune. Beira had reached behind her and pulled out a figurine, worn smooth by the repeated movement of hands over its features. She had stroked its face one more time and then dropped it in Elspet’s coat pocket, where it would stay for the next year, a comfort to anxious fingers.

It was this figure that brought Elspet out of their head now. Their numb fingers had gone into their pockets, seeking out comfort from warm stone. They paused and heard the Old Beira’s cackle on the wind that whipped around them.

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A stone figurine, centuries old, flew like a rocket into the temple of the former constable. He dropped his knife and staggered backwards, hand coming up to touch the welling blood. His foot dropped into the Shee and a blue figure surged out of the water, impossibly large against the tiny river. Arms wrapped around the Hunter and dragged him down under, disappearing in a cloud of bubbles.

Elspet stared, arm still cocked from throwing the stone. Deirdre dropped the sweater.

With a soft splash, Sean stepped back out of the water, his tail and blue skin rippling away as if it never existed. He bent down to pick up his sweater, and tried to brush the grass and dirt off of it. Blushing, he looked up through his eyelashes at the two older people in front of him.

“Right,” said Elspet faintly, stumbling over to Deirdre.

The bean-nighe, her eyes still locked on the silt that had been stirred up, reached over and took their hand.