

The Hag

By Aimee Hart

We stumble upon the fresh greens by accident. Almost by accident. We smelled the fresh, tasty tang of daffodils and crawled until our knees were stained green and our lungs felt tight, like we were in a chokehold.

We picked at the sharp, pinpricking green and yellow stubs that clung to us like emeralds. We put them in our mouth, immediately retched at the taste and rolled onto our backs until we can only see a blue sea. It's a faded blue, the colour of a baby's skin when the blood is thin, translucent blue that is difficult for a parent to look at. A cold, dead blue with only white wisps of life for company.

The bed we lie in soon becomes a thin thought that becomes nothing, and perhaps that is where we are and what we are. Nowhere. Nothing. A lot of nobodies who are in fact nothing in the middle of a near barren green wasteland of nowhere. Where the grass is dying, unloved and the gate that walls this wilderness off from the natural world on its last legs, creaking at each puff of wind that weaves past it.

But then we are everywhere. Doubt is a cold, cruel lie and we are everywhere. We transcend from the daffodils and divulge further into the cracks of tarnished white brick. We think to stay there for a little while, to rest, but then the scent of burnt toast and sounds of crying prick at our ears and we realize.

We've been here before.

We scrape until we bleed and rubble sinks into our bloodstream, we dig deeper and deeper until we can feel the remnants of a fire lick at our skin – rough, like the flat of a cat's tongue. It takes minutes, but it feels like days and the grass is sprinkled with white like sugar-dusted cakes when we finally fall inside.

It is here where we first see the girl. She is hidden under a mountain of duvets that we pull apart like strands of hair from a comb in the dead of night when it is too hot.

We settle under her bed, our nails cracked and dripping dirt all over the carpet and watch. We watch her watch the now dead daffodils and beg, salt still dripping from her lips, for a life to grow back again. We watch until she falls asleep and then, only then, do we crawl in next to her. We take her frail body in our arms and hold her tight until her eyes open, sad, bleary little things, and watch us with a curiosity we have never seen before.

"You took away Maisie." She says and we shake and move away, untucking our translucent hands away from her thin body and crawling back under her bed. Her weight shifts on the mattress and we quiver at the thought of confrontation. But the moon soon leaves and daylight makes us hiss and groan at its interruption.

The girl leaves and we are free to pull the curtains to a close and wait until she returns. When she does she still has lingering tear tracks on her cheeks and she carries a weight to her that is familiar and yet something we still do not rightly understand. It is something that we hesitate to touch again when she eventually falls asleep, her name being called from below ignored completely.

She is cold, as cold the dusted grass that we can see from where we lie beside her looks, and again we try to warm her. Again she cracks her small, blue eyes open and watches us watch her.

She says the name Maisie again. It strikes something inside us like a match and while we do not move away we instead shake. We shake our heads, our hands, our legs and feet. We do not stop until she tells us to, her voice high as though she's touched something icy hot, dragging pain to the surface like a needle. Her eyes fill with salt soon after and it is only then that we flee, crawling on our hands from the sheets as fast as we can. We ignore her shrieks for her mother to seep into the fibres of the carpet like water droplets, waiting patiently until the thudding of footsteps fade and there is nothing but overwhelming silence.

We forget how long we stay there. Time is something we do not think about when we hide, instead we dream until we forget what we have done and creep back out into the world like a newborn, hungry for the warmth of a mother's embrace that we do not think we ever had. This time when we take form we spring up from the carpeted floor like blue lilies, our gangly limbs making us fall until we right ourselves in the warm morning sun and look around.

The girl is gone from her bed and instead we see a crib, an elegant but worn golden M engraved at the head of the bed. Next to it we see the girl but changed, kneeling yet clearly taller with longer hair and a swollen belly that makes her look uneven, out of shape in a way that makes us prod at our own stomach until we can feel our ribs crack.

It is the noise that makes her turn and her eyes, pale and blue like before, widen. She moves from her seat at the end of a bed that is far too small for her and covers her bloated belly, bares her teeth like a wolf.

"You took Maisie!" She yells and her fingers that once had been as small as worms forms into a fist that makes us bulk up onto our hind legs, growing and growing until we are at our full height in the sun that we barely remember cowering from.

"Get away! Get the hell away!" She continues to screech, "you might have taken her but you won't take anyone else! You're not taking anyone else!"

We cock our head to the side and watch as the seasons pass in the iris of her eye. What had once been recognized as the grief of winter was now the strength of summer, a look that made us straighten and turn until we could see out of the window and see that daffodils had been replaced by sunflowers- bright and hopeful, not dead at all.

She moves towards us and we do what we always do – what feels natural, what always does when a threat is made.

We take her hands in ours and force her down next to the crib, feeling nothing when she kicks and screams. We will calm her, we will make sure she understands that we mean her no harm. That we have to do this. She will not stop screaming so we must make her stop before we are found, it is simple. That is all we can do.

She is on her back and she fights, oh how she fights, until we have no choice but to sit on her chest to trap the air in her lungs. She stops then and moves to push at us, feverous and desperate in such a way that it looks as though she is drowning, as though she cannot reach the surface and water fills her lungs until she resembles a bruise, purple and black.

We watch as her flailing stops and the pink of her cheeks drain from her like the dregs of soap from hair. It is a slow process and at one point she coughs so violently we worry that she will continue in her thrashing and we will have to sit there longer in order to calm her. But no, eventually she falls and our legs, numb from disuse, brush against her cold skin in our effort to right ourselves.

She stares calmly up at the peeling ceiling, her eyes pale and her lips tinged white like the cold that used to top the grass what feels like so many years ago. To us she looks ethereal, silent and cold like an angel that's been abandoned. An angel that we have clipped the wings off of. She looks strange, peculiar.

When we take a chance to stare out of the window we see the first flakes of winter and we realize that looking out there and looking down at her shrivelled flesh...

We've been here before.