

The Wolf Flute

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The coach stopped at the crossroads. Peter jumped out, slinging a rucksack over his shoulder. The doors hissed shut and the vehicle moved off, taking the twenty-first century with it.

Peter exhaled, his frozen breath charged like a cloud of poison gas with her name. The trace image of her face burned his retina still. He scanned the bruised sky for portents. Peter frowned at the commitment-phobic GPS on his phone. The little blue arrow looked like it was in the middle of one of those vague Fantasy maps, with only the slightest suggestion of geography. Sighing, he turned it off, then consigning himself to luck, and a school certificate in Orienteering, he struck out.

The flaking sign read: 'Blaidd Coed'. The woods were dark, sucking in the last gasps of daylight. The stand of trees seemed to brood on the brow of the crooked hill, the weight of some ancient resentment upon their shoulders.

Peter longed for the anonymity the woods offered. A refuge from the world and its ways. Humans did not make sense. Perhaps nature would offer solace – it did not hurt out of spite, only need.

He wanted to forget, to purge her from his mind with sweat and mud, adrenaline and deep silence.

Peter yomped down the bridleway, his hiking boots leaving runes of intent. He had bought them for the visit to Australia – what would have been their big trip together – and he suddenly remembered hearing of how an enraged Aborigine would walk in a straight line without stopping across the Outback until his anger wore out, then he would strike a stick into the ground to measure his grievance in distance from home. There was little chance of such a single-minded trajectory here – the woods immediately thwarted those notions, fallen branches blocking his way, roots and unseen burrows tripping him.

He stopped to catch his breath, and to rub the stitch developing in his side.

The air quality had changed. The forest consumed sound. His clumsy intrusion had become embarrassing, so he lightened his step and for the first time since his journey began he became aware of his surroundings in more than a perfunctory manner. Here was something to absorb him, to distract him from himself.

The woodland lined a narrow valley leading down to the coast. He heard the sound of the stream first, then caught flashes of it. It seemed to hoard the remaining light, refashioning it into something not quite of this world. The footpath soon joined its banks and for a while he was happy to follow its motion, the natural flow of things.

His progress was rudely checked by a fence across the green lane. There was a sign, hard to read in the dusk, so he pulled out his phone and used its light:

test site

Please keep out

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This was a public right of way and he was buggered if he was going to let some scummy corporate bullshit stop his ramble! And so Peter clambered over the fence, indignation fuelling his boldness.

A twig snapped as he landed. *Shit.*

A pheasant bolted from the undergrowth, making his heart race.

Perhaps he should have taken the road.

Yet something stubborn in him, his anger line, made him want to trespass, to Hell with the consequences.

Whistling nervously, he pushed on – the sound a feeble challenge to the dark.

In the fading light he followed the stream down the valley – somewhere ahead he recalled there was a pub to be found that did B&B. Out of season, Peter hoped it would be quiet. He'd booked a room before he left – his one concession to common sense. The woman who answered with a rolling Rhonda accent sounded almost surprised, but not displeased. A late customer, the dregs of the season. He could imagine her airing a room. Trying to find something vegetarian to pander to his lily-livered Sais ways. This was meat-eating country. Lamb was always on the menu. And Englishmen probably.

His empty stomach growled. Then turned.

He was not alone.

Peter sensed it first, with the subconscious certainty of someone knowing they are being eavesdropped upon. Then movement, independent of the slow world of the wood. Something fast. A herd of deer? No.

Bulkier. Bolder.

The shadows came alive. Pine bristles of fur. The hair raised on the back of his neck. Amber flashed in the shadows of the trees.

Wolf eyes!

You're imagining things, he told himself. It was just his horror movie habit coming back to haunt him. He tried not to give into the panic but he couldn't help walking faster. His heartbeat kept pace and he found himself enjoying this frisson of fear in a perverse way. It made him suddenly begin to cherish his sorry arse. Maybe he didn't want oblivion after all.

The path became more tangled, underbrush snagged his clothes, scratched at his skin. His hand caught on a bramble and he sucked at the ragged wound. His breath was heavy now, his heartbeat pounding in his ears. Out of the corner of his eye he caught flashes of movement, fur and muscle in the undergrowth. He was being outflanked – soon his path would be cut off.

He would be trapped.

Peter considered the stream as a place of safety, but it broadened and deepened, its flow becoming a torrent. There was a growing roar.

Up ahead the stream swelled before cascading down a tumble of rocks. In its dark mirror a bulbous moon was reflected, rising over the distant sea.

Wolf howls split the night and his world imploded. This couldn't be happening to him! It was *wrong*: he watched, not experienced, such things.

A second chorus of tortured beasts brought home the grim reality of it. He was surrounded by feral eyes. He could smell their stink. Their raw energy.

Then the howling stopped.

A flash of silver caught his eye. Peter gasped.

Silhouetted by the bloated moon was a slender female figure. She held a thin instrument to her lips. Above the tremor of the weir he heard a haunting melody, the mellifluous trill of a flute. It was as if the moonlight had condensed into a silver shaft and the sound it made was the sound of the moon's soul, with all its enchanting, yearning melancholy. And the woman who played it was equally mesmerising. Dressed in sheer silvery silk, long dark hair a cataract of shadow over her pale shoulders, lithe-limbed, small-breasted, delicately-boned. Her beauty hurt him but he could not turn away. If she was aware of his

presence she did not show it, except in this beguiling display. Could it all be for him? He dared not move, in case he dislodged a rock or broke a twig. All thought of his pursuit evaporated. His predators were equally appeased, if he knew the truth.

From the resinous shadows amber eyes stared back as though someone had torn open the fabric of the night to reveal the fire beneath.

His ragged breath froze in the cold night. He hoped it wouldn't betray his existence. His messy mortality. Yet this moment was outside time. And he forgot about the cold, the ache of his limbs, and his former terror.

The vale around seemed to listen in rapt attention, yet the very surroundings seemed complicit, compounding the magic in this moment. As the moonlight touched everything like a silver Midas, so to the flute's music expressed the *is*-ness of the trees, rocks, stream, bridge – the secret name of things.

Peter was drawn into this spell, felt himself unravel, as though the flautist knew the hidden depths of his heart, drawing out the poison and sorrow and re-sanctifying it. Yet the life-giving transfusion had fundamentally changed him – now he had quicksilver running in his veins and only one entity controlled it, could soothe or sway it. It felt now as if the flautist's subtle breathings and fingerings played *him*. At first he resisted the macabre waltz of it, the way it swept him along...but it was so exquisite that he yielded to its overwhelming power and pleasure.

Then the music stopped: a raw hole in the world, tearing at his heart.

A dark cloud covered the moon and when there was next a break in the scudding canopy, the mysterious flautist was gone.

The glade shrank back to mundane dimensions. Around him, the trees, rocks and stream became themselves again, returning to their steady business. The wood breathed out and the cold seeped into his bones once more. Peter became aware of the physicality of his surroundings and his limited warmth on a winter's night. There was no sign of his pursuers. Perhaps he had imagined the whole thing, touched by the moon. Perhaps not. What he'd felt *had* been real – he was still experiencing its impact. He needed some hot sweet tea, or a stiff drink more like.

Rattled, but with survival instinct kicking in, he carried on down the path, and carefully crossed the weir – pausing for a precarious moment at the spot where the woman had stood, feet naked in the icy current...Had she been real? A *fata morgana*? Even if she had been, Peter still wanted her phone number.

Reaching the other side he saw a signpost in the silvery light. Following it around the serpentine curve of the valley he was relieved to see lights ahead. The profile of a large building silhouetted against the indigo night. The Blaidd Inn. Its sign, a weathered wolf in mid-howl, creaked in the sharp gusts that pawed the valley canopy. Eagerly, he made his way towards it.

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It was an old building, heavy-eaved with thick-thatched roof. The tiny blurred windows looked out like rheumy elephant eyes from the sagging flanks of the walls.

Peter was glad to enter its protection. Leaving the wood to the mercy of the night, he stamped off the claggy soil from his boots on the mat and opened the frost-panelled door. The warmth poured over him like treacle. Unzipping his fleece, he inspected the spartan interior. Uneven stone floors, wooden stools, limed walls, and low-warped beams seemed less anachronistic than the old jukebox, flanked by a blinking arcade machine, dolmen-like in the corner. The dark and smoky snug, bereft of trade, was dominated by a crackling hearth. The ancient fireplace with its blackened stonework and massive lintel drew him and he stood over it, gazing into the flames, warming himself. A jaundiced newspaper article in an old frame told the story of Blaidd Coed, where the last wolf in Wales was shot.

‘You must be the Englishman’.

Peter nearly jumped out of his skin. A woman had appeared from behind the bar. She wiped her hands on her apron. Middle-aged, cleavaged, over made-up. Her hair was unnaturally black, but her smile seemed genuine enough.

‘Yes – I made the booking earlier’.

‘Mr Maltravers, I remember. Single’.

Peter wasn’t sure if she meant his room, or if it was some kind of appraisal.

‘You look pale – have you caught a chill?’

He had overlooked how frightful he must look. ‘I ... I had a strange experience in the woods. I need a drink’.

‘Here, my love, have this’. The woman poured him a brandy.

Peter walked warily to the bar – its shining optics and mirrors seemed incongruous after the ragged forest just beyond the door. As if remembering the customs of civilisation he picked up the amber-filled glass and downed it in one. The fire filled his torso like a slow explosion, purging the cold from him in a series of shudders. He coughed, but felt better.

‘I’m Mrs Griffiths, the landlady. You look like you’ve had a nasty fright. Are you sure you’re okay?’

Peter nodded, smiling weakly. The brandy had burnt his throat. ‘S’fine’, he croaked. ‘Just show me to my room, please’.

The landlady made a sympathetic sound, and taking a key from a rack led the young man upstairs. She showed him into his small room, explaining the facilities. Peter murmured politely, fending off his fatigue or the hysteria restrained but intensified by the stifling normality of it all. Having agreed a mealtime, he was relieved when she finally left. Her overpoweringly sickly perfume lingered.

Peter dumped his backpack and flopped on the bed. His head was spinning. He closed his eyes and let the nausea subside.

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Refreshed from a shower, Peter sat at a table by the fire and tucked into his meal. Things were looking up, he thought, as he supped on his pint of half-decent local ale. A change of clothes and he felt almost himself again.

Peter was beginning to wonder if he and the landlady were the only ones around. Not that he minded – in fact, he enjoyed the peace and quiet and he was in no mood for chit-chat. Yet he was eager to share his experiences with the landlady – perhaps she could throw some light on the subject.

But first, there was a little matter to clear up.

‘Is this organic?’ Peter asked.

The landlady seemed to bridle at this interrogation of the steaming plate of food she had proudly placed before him.

‘Oh yes, it’s all from a local farm’, she reassured him – a ghost of a smile on her face. She pointed to a sign on the wall, which read: all the food served here is GMO free. *As far as we know*, was scrawled underneath.

Peter sheepishly inspected the pie for foreign material. He was reassured the meaty chunks were soya. In fact, it had been so long since he had eaten meat that it would be alien to his taste buds.

His hunger got the better of him, but he rolled the food around in his mouth suspiciously before swallowing. What he had experienced in the woods was equally hard to digest. He felt wary of ridicule and used his mealtime to order his thoughts. He would broach the subject afterwards, he decided – just as the door burst open.

A gang of farm-workers swaggered in. They eyed him cautiously in passing, but called out in loud friendly terms to the landlady. Their gruff voices filled the bar. They were rangy men, black-browed and grizzled, with mud-splattered work-clothes and boots. Over their shoulders they carried bloody bundles, which they presented to Mrs Griffiths like trophies. She examined them critically, fingering their flesh like a housewife at the market. Then she nodded, called out in a shrill voice and a large bald man appeared at the kitchen door and took them away in his massive hands.

Peter had lost his appetite. He looked at the half-eaten food before him and imagined a kitchen dripping with bloody carcasses, congealing lard and offal.

The landlady thanked the men and called out: ‘Megan, come down now – these men are thirsty’.

There were light-footsteps and a young woman appeared at the bottom of the stairs behind the bar. She immediately caught the attention of everyone there. A wave of dark hair, bright fiery eyes, pale-skinned, slender and shapely in a long tight dress, a flash of silver about her neck. Peter watched in fascination as she pulled the pints of frothy ale for the men. They bantered with her in a frisky, familiar way. Occasionally, when she glanced over at him, there would be a comment under breath followed by a roar of laughter.

Yet Peter couldn’t help staring at her – she was the spitting image of the flute-maiden, although her manner was somewhat less refined. If that ethereal beauty had an earthly sister surely this must be her.

His attraction was tainted by the memory of his ex: the scar carved on his heart. The desire the landlady’s daughter stirred in him was painful, as it rubbed salt into a sore wound. He still bore the teeth-marks. Yet he found himself almost blushing when she snaked over to him to take his plates.

‘Finished are we?’

‘Mm, yes. Thanks’. He noticed her silver-toothed necklace and crescent earrings.

‘Are you staying here long?’ She cast an eye back to the men at the bar and exchanged smiles.

‘I –I don’t know. I just needed a break. A bit of peace and quiet’.

‘Oh, you’ll get that around here. Nothing much happens in Blaidd Coed, does it boys?’

Again, the raucous laughter.

Peter rolled his eyes.

‘Don’t mind them, bark’s worse than their bite. Like puppy dogs they are, if you know how to treat them proper’.

She collected up the crockery and in a swish of skirts was away. Peter watched her disappear into the kitchen.

‘Not chatting up our Megan are we?’ called out one of the men. Another elbowed him in the ribs.

‘Sorry, boy. Not many visitors around here’, explained the elbower in an apologetic manner. ‘Where you from then?’

Peter spoke the name of his city. There was a hiss of derision.

‘Never mind, eh? I expect that’s why you need a break. All that traffic and rushing about’. This one seemed to be making an effort, or was he just playing with Peter – it appeared to him his comments were more for the benefit of his friends than some genuine gesture of interest.

‘It was a woman’.

‘Oh, yes. It always is’, replied the man in sympathy. There was a snigger from the bar.

‘Who – who’s the bar maid?’

‘Megan? She’s the landlady’s daughter. Lovely, isn’t she?’ The man’s eyes shone.

Peter didn’t want to agree too heartily.

‘Yes, she reminds me of someone...’ Peter looked haunted.

The man leaned closer. ‘Who?’

‘Someone I saw on the way here ...in the woods’.

There seemed to be a silence in the bar you could slice, as though the walls themselves wanted to hear.

Peter looked at the man, expecting a sarcastic comment. Instead, the local sat down and lent in. ‘Blaidd Coed?’

‘Yes, by the waterfall. She – she was playing a flute...in the moonlight’, Peter whispered, expecting a wall of derision for uttering his delusion. ‘She was ... beautiful, the music...spell-binding’.

All the men seemed lost to this image, as if it had been conjured up by Peter’s words. Then the mirage was shattered as Megan walked in. Everyone turned to look at her, the hungry gazes pouncing upon her soft form.

‘Goodness, quiet in here!’ She folded her arms primly. ‘You know it’s rude to stare! Dinner’s ready soon so go and wash yourselves and take your dirty minds with you!’

The men, suitably castigated, filed to the washroom.

‘Honestly, those men!’ said Megan, aloud, to herself or to her audience of one, Peter wasn’t sure.

‘I’m sorry’, he said, as if apologising for his gender. ‘I was staring too. I hope you don’t mind me saying but you are quite ... you know’.

Megan looked at him with her uncanny green eyes. ‘Quite?’

‘Sorry. Wrong word. *Utterly* beautiful’.

‘That’s better. Now, have another drink’. She poured something dark red and he received it from her hands like the grail itself. He sipped the liquor and gazed into her depths, holding communion with the feminine.

In the washroom, the coarse laughter of the men echoed amid the running of taps. From the kitchen came sizzling and the hack of blade into meat. The landlady was singing to herself. A jukebox suddenly piped in old 45s, forgotten classics, shellac timewarps. ‘*Ghost in my House*’ kicked in, right on cue. The moment elongated.

Peter floated back to his seat.

The landlady brought in a trolley and laid out the dinner.

The men returned and descended upon their food, raw steaks oozing blood. They tore them apart with their hands and teeth. Their eyes grew wild. They wiped the grease from their grizzled faces with the back of their hands. Peter could see every follicle on their ruddy skin. Beads of sweat stood out like stars upon their brows, glowing in the firelight. All he could hear was the sound of eating, of chewing and swallowing, slurping and gulping, masticating canines, digestive juices doing their work. He felt the room was eating him: that he was in the bowels of a great beast. The bald man, sharpening his knives, stared at him from the kitchen. The landlady’s daughter laughed and danced to the music for the men, as they banged their knives and pints on the table in time to the rhythm, pounding inside Peter’s head as the raging fire engulfed the room.

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He staggered to the toilets, the pub re-arranging itself around him as though a scene in a computer game – sinister geometries intent on his doom. His stomach convulsed as the chunks of soya caught in his throat. Sounds of derision followed him as he burst into the foetid gents, crashing into a cubicle. His face scanned the graffiti – the usual obscenities, racism, slander, and sexual propositions – as he slid down the partition onto his knees, jeans soaking in the puddles of piss. He heaved into the unflushed bowl. At first nothing would

come though his guts strained to breaking. He groaned in agony, wallowing in his misery, cursing the cruel universe, wishing for an end to it all.

Boots outside the cubicle, banging. ‘You alright in there?’

Then a second spasm took him. This time what seemed to be a long hairball ejected from his mouth. It hung there, half-in, half-out – grey matted fur, slimed with foul fluid. This time he had no trouble vomiting. His body heaved, forcing it out – it kept coming, the tensile skein of fur, until it filled his mouth, making him gag for breath.

A tail.

As Peter’s eyes widened – an underground map of blood vessels – it curled; shook itself free of liquid.

Then a bolt of agony from his bowels made him fall on all fours. His sphincter screamed as something was forced out, getting larger and larger until the agony was beyond endurance. The seat of his jeans split apart and an arrow of snarling jaw appeared, followed by a pair of burning eyes, long furry ears. It opened its maw and howled.

He ran with the pack, sniffing the ground as he went – the invisible circuitry of scent revealed. The moon boomed in his skull. Limbs lithe, heart strong. Through the secret paths of the wood to the falls. She waited for them, their priestess. As the moon rose bright behind her, Megan played on the silver flute. The wolves watched, flames for eyes burning into her bright flesh. The music thrummed within the subtle frequencies of their hearing, holding them in thrall. It eased their suffering – it was the only thing that could.

When the moon was dark the agony was unbearable: with her favours withdrawn all the wolves could do was lick their wounds in the caves of their loneliness. But now it was all worth the wait – once more they could hear that music that soothed their souls. All they had to do was catch meat for the mistress. Submit to the tests. It was a simple life, satisfying. Follow instincts. Kill to live. For her love.

He enjoyed being part of the pack, belonging at last. They were a rough lot, but straightforward. No mind games, no hidden agendas. The hunt was all. He no longer worried about life. He just lived it. In fact, he had never felt more alive. As long as they were undisturbed life would be peaceful. The odd missing lamb was a small sacrifice. They marked

their territory. The blood of the wood was good. And when they put their skins back on they played at being human, and the beast inside the man would sleep, for a while.