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The Sad Tale of Eleri Wynn
by Jacquelyn Benoit

Nurses and orderlies rushed in to help the woman as her limbs jerked senselessly against the floor and her eyes, unfocused, pierced my rough woolen cloak. Spittle fell from her lips as she was hauled away, and the silence which had fallen alongside the woman lifted, everyone turning back to their previous tasks.

I pried myself from the chilly stone wall and peered at each of the hollow-eyed patients, trying to find Eleri. They all were dressed in the same dull grey woolen dresses. Some had loose braids, as though they were ready for sleep, but others were clearly unable or unwilling to dress their own hair and let it hang in knots and tangles about their shoulders. I was shocked at the wide variety of patients here; some, like the woman from before, were clearly unhinged, glaring suspiciously and mumbling incoherently, but others seemed lucid, offering smiles as they met my gaze. I hoped Eleri would be one of the lucid ones, but rather feared she'd be like the others.

My acquaintance with the Widow Wynn was limited. I lived on a neighboring farm and would oftentimes chat with her daughter Guinevere when we met at market. Eleri herself hadn't left her property since her husband's death. I'd met her just once before her husband's untimely demise. She'd seemed kind, if a little gruff. The others had always liked the Wynns and had nothing but nice words for them. Still, since they were unable (or unwilling) to leave our village,

I thought it only right that I take on the mantle of neighborly concern, to make sure Eleri knows she isn't alone.

I found her sitting by a window. I couldn't help gasping at her bedraggled state. Her hair, which had been just a shade darker than her daughter's gleaming gold, was now tangled and dulled with dirt. While she wore a clean grey garment matching the others', her skin was streaked with dirt and something dark I suspected was blood. She was scribbling something as I approached. "Eleri? Eleri Wynn?"

She turned, and I saw one more change in her: a white bandage covering one of her eyes. "Who—?" she croaked. She cleared her throat. "Who are you?" She looked me up and down, taking in the sensible boots, the *betgwn*, the shawl, and finally the cap upon my head. "You're from Berhyn?"

I smiled. "Yes, Eleri. The whole of Berhyn wishes you well."

Her grey gaze slid from my face, checking the surroundings, before pulling me down beside her. "You must listen to me," she whispered, her sour breath fanning across my face. "My daughter, my beautiful Guinevere, has been taken." Her eye, though glistening with tears, was clear and sharp, different from the unfocused stares the others had offered.

I tried to pull away. "Eleri," I said, "no one has taken your daughter. She's at home. Do you know where you are?"

"Of course I know where I am." Eleri snapped. "I'm locked in North Wales Asylum. And my daughter *isn't* at home." Her grasp tightened as she begged. "You must believe me. She was taken." Seeming to realize how tightly she was holding me, Eleri released me. She looked out the window and sighed.

My throat tightened with pity for the poor woman. I grabbed her hands, squeezing them gently. "Why don't you tell me what happened, Eleri?"

Hope lit her tired features. "It started when Guinevere tried to lure a *bwbach* into the house..."

Guinevere was a charming girl of sixteen, nearly a woman grown. She and her mother worked together to maintain their land. They never had much, but they scraped by each year. Guinevere went to bed every night with aching muscles, and she woke every morning to do it all again. This was the reality and rhythm of life in their small Welsh village.

Guinevere, though, had dreams beyond farming. She longed to attend the festivals with the other girls, to dance around the maypole, laughing with joy, instead of falling into sleep early, exhausted from the day's work.

It was because of her desire to be free from life's responsibilities that Guinevere left out an offering one night. She had lingered in the village that day, listening to a story being told to eager children. The story concerned an older couple who had a helpful household spirit—a *bwbach*—in their home. Every night, they left a small offering by their hearth, some bread or biscuits and water or milk, and the next morning, their household would be straightened: the dishes cleaned, the floors swept, and so on.

Guinevere had been enchanted. Perhaps she, too, could lure such a spirit into her home. If she had help with her nightly tasks, then she could join the rest of the village girls in their revelries. So, Guinevere left out a small bowl of milk and a crust of bread.

The next morning, Guinevere awoke and was delighted to see her offering had been taken. The wooden floors were spotless, the fire crackled merrily, and her wardrobe had been mended. Guinevere ran to her mother, eager to share the news of their good fortune.

Instead of excitement, Eleri was livid. "You mustn't play with the faeries—they're tricksters. It's dangerous for humans to mess with magick; that way lies madness."

When Guinevere protested, explaining how the *bwbach* would help, Eleri just shook her head. "Do your own work, Gwen. You cannot rely upon magick."

Guinevere left her mother in a huff, more determined than ever, in that way 16-year-olds so often are when met with a parent's resistance. She continued to leave out offerings after Eleri went to sleep, and the house continued to be cared for by creatures unseen.

Eleri was left in ignorance for about a week. Then, one fateful morning, she discovered a circle of clovers and mushrooms enclosing a patch of dark green grass. Eleri immediately confronted her wayward daughter, and it was here she made a fatal mistake. She dragged Guinevere out to the faerie ring, using it as proof of her daughter's disobedience. Eleri was so busy pleading with her daughter to stop that she missed the gleam of excitement in Guinevere's bright eyes.

Knowing she had to act, Eleri spent the day warding herself, Guinevere, and the house against fae influence. She nailed an iron horseshoe to the door, as her grandmother had taught her. She pulled her iron wedding band from the box in which she kept it and slid it onto her

finger. Finally, she found a branch of rowan that had been passed down in the family and instructed Guinevere to always keep it on her person. Satisfied that she had safeguarded all that was precious, she went back about her business.

Guinevere, meanwhile, was determined, despite her mother's wards. She went into town, neglecting her duties, and visited Canbrie, the village's wise woman and folk-healer. It was there she learned of an ointment that would allow her to see the fae in their true forms. Canbrie sent her away with the recipe and a warning: faeries were tricksters, and Guinevere may have called upon something dark without realizing it.

Guinevere set to work. She again neglected her chores and collected the necessary herbs and flowers. The mixture had to sit out in the moonlight for three consecutive nights, and then it was ready for use.

Eleri had noticed her daughter was slacking off but attributed it to Guinevere's anger. After several days of this, Eleri became frustrated at her daughter's childish behavior. She resolved to speak with her daughter the following morning. Eleri slept that night, thinking that everything would be set right in the morning.

Guinevere, meanwhile, only pretended to sleep. She'd applied the ointment as Canbrie had directed and planned steal away to the faerie ring that night to see them dance. Once the moon had risen and the cottage rumbled with Eleri's snores, Guinevere snuck out into the night.

Eleri was working herself into a fit.

An orderly approached, asking if I needed assistance.

Eleri cringed into me, so I offered him a smile. "No, it's okay. I have her."

His face dropped the kind expression it had worn just a moment before, a flash of rage in his eyes as he retreated. I caught the faint stench of sulfur and smoke and wrinkled my nose.

Eleri whimpered.

"Eleri, it's okay."

She shook her head. "No, it's not—they took my Guinevere." A few tears had leaked out during her story, leaving a clean streak through the dirt on her cheek.

"Who did, Eleri?"

"The fae."

"Eleri," I tried to use my kindest voice, "faeries are nothing but myth. They're no more than a folk tale, meant to entertain children."

"You're a fool." Eleri hissed. "The fair folk are as real as you and me. Those stories are more than entertainment; they're warnings, passed down from mother to daughter, generation after generation."

Knowing that battle was lost, I tried to get her back on track. "What happened next, Eleri?"

"I don't know what woke me that morning. Mother's instinct, I suppose..."

Eleri bolted awake in the dark grey of early dawn. Something was off. It wasn't until she rose from bed that she realized it was too quiet, the walls echoing with the sound of just one person's breath where there should've been two. Guinevere's bed lay empty, save for a rowan stick and small vial of ointment.

Eleri knew exactly where her daughter had gone. She snatched her wrapper, smeared the remaining mixture onto one of her eyes, and raced from the house barefoot. The dew-soaked grass sparkled in the early light as Eleri sprinted over the hill towards the faerie ring. Just as she crested it, someone let out a piercing shriek that chilled Eleri to her core. She arrived just in time to watch grey-skinned creatures with dead, black eyes drag her daughter into pools of shadow and disappear.

Eleri fell to her knees, soaking her nightgown, watching a trail of inky blackness race across the countryside, leaving behind the faintest whiff of mildew and decay that had no place in the ever-brightening dawn. It was as the sky became a soft lavender and bird song rang out across the grassy fields that Eleri stood, knowing what she had to do. In a state of numbed calm, she returned to her cottage, dressed, and saddled her mule for a long journey.

She set out as the sun began its climb, dissolving the night's dew. She followed the faint, dark trail, distinct against the vibrant Welsh countryside. While her mule wasn't the fastest creature, its steady pace brought her to a bustling village as the sun sank beneath the horizon. In the fading fire of orange light, Eleri could just make out the trail that led straight through the center of town. She urged her mule on, slowing their pace to a walk in the busy lane.

Laughing people pressed around her. As she reached the town's center square, she realized their excitement was because of *Calan Haf*. Eleri and Guinevere existed on the outskirts

of their village, and they rarely took part in the festivals. Between their isolation and Eleri's panic, she'd forgotten about tonight's celebration of the upcoming summer.

This town's decor was more lavish than anything Eleri had seen. All around the square, merchants sold their goods, food booths offered fragrant delicacies, and bright banners hung from every surface. Several large bonfires were set up and even more were scattered along the outskirts. The town's crowning achievement, though, was their maypole. The dancers sung and skipped as they performed, the crowd around them throwing flowers as they watched them spin and swirl in unison.

Through all this commotion, Eleri kept going. They reached the edges of the town, where the shadows seemed even darker in contrast with the blazing fires and joy permeating the town. When Eleri realized they'd reached the end of the trail, she slid from her mule and crept into the darkness, the oppressive scent of rot and decay nearly suffocating her.

There she found her beautiful daughter. Guinevere, alongside four other young women dressed in similar white nightgowns and unbound hair, was moving with preternatural grace in a whirling dance at the center of a perverted maypole. Tears spilled down their cheeks and their shoulders shook in silent sobs.

Around them, on the outer ring of the maypole, more of those sickly, grey creatures were dancing in a similar fashion to the women at the center. They held ropes of thorn, and as they moved through the steps of the dance, the brambles wove into the shape of a cage. A thick crowd surrounded them, some looking like the dancers, but others far less humanoid. Some bore sharp claws and teeth that jutted out from slimy grey skin, others had bodies of pure darkness in the vague silhouette of a human. Some unseen drummer kept a steady beat for the dark ritual as their screeching song and cries of twisted elation broke the night with jagged, shrill notes,

Terror froze Eleri in place for a few minutes. How could she possibly save her daughter from this macabre nightmare? Finally, the inferno of maternal love melted the ice from her veins. She had to try. She attempted to push her way through the crowd. The beings greeted her with mocking jeers and sharp blows, shoving her back, tearing her dress, and scratching her skin. She stumbled back out, falling onto her hands and knees. She shook it off and tried again.

And again.

After being ejected for the third time, she paused, the breath knocked from her lungs after landing flat on her back. Once she could breathe again, she stood, wiping the dripping sweat and

blood from her eyes. Her hair had been torn and tugged loose from her braid. Her sleeves hung in tatters. Her bodice, too, had been sliced by their claws, and she had a long, deep scratch across her stomach. She was preparing for another attempt, when the crowd in front of her parted.

She started forward, spying her daughter, nearly trapped, at the center, but a new creature was approaching. The scent of smoke and sulfur grew suffocating as it slithered towards her. Its form was concealed by a dark crimson cloak, and clouds of ash billowed in its wake, nearly concealing Guinevere from view. It reached out long, grey, spindly fingers towards Eleri, who scrambled backwards in panic. She was engulfed by the foul-smelling smoke as the being stooped over her, closing its hands around her face.

The last thing Eleri remembered as the shock of pain burst through her skull, forcing her into unconsciousness, was the look of complete terror on her daughter's sobbing face as the thorn cage closed in.

"Eleri, please," I said. "It's okay, you're safe." I rubbed her back, trying to ignore the filth she was covered in.

"They got her! They got her and now she's gone!" Eleri's body shook, not unlike the woman I'd seen earlier. I had no idea what to do. Guilt-tinged relief filled me when the orderly from before appeared.

He grabbed Eleri's arm, and her sobs increased in volume. "We have to give her laudanum when she's like this." He glared at me.

She grew more frantic, her heaving sobs turning into shrieks. "Please, no, don't let him take me, too!" Her single grey eye found my face, now bright with terror, not tears.

I frowned. "Maybe—"

"You need to go. We can't have you here when it's clear you're upsetting her." The man dragged Eleri away with little effort, despite her thrashing.

I stood, brushing off my skirts. As I turned to leave, the scent of smoke permeated the air. I looked out the window, expecting to see some sort of fire, but there was only bright sunlight. I left the way I'd come, glancing back just once as Eleri's voice reached a new pitch, echoing down the halls.

"Please, bring her back. Give back my daughter, I beg you!"