

The Woman of Flowers

by *Bethan James*

The story of the village that vanished begins with the woman made of wildflowers. Alys tells her grandchildren this tale every November on her birthday, turning the words over and over until they are worn smooth as pebbles by her tongue. The twin girls are sharing an armchair by the fireplace, mugs of hot cocoa clutched in moon-pale hands; they were playing outside, and hungry frost has licked the warmth off their skin.

Before the fabled vanishings, Alys continues, the Woman of Flowers, as the villagers called her, made her home in the abandoned windmill. They said this peculiar woman appeared from beyond the emerald hills, accompanied by the scent of buttercup nectar and fresh honey. Her petal-thin skin was the blooms of meadowsweet. Her gown was spun from blossoms of oak. Her hair was trailing wisteria vines. No one knew where she was from or why she was here. But those questions ceased to matter when she weaved her stories—the village folk would lay down their farming tools and gather outside the mill to hear them.

Moulding words like clay in the palms of her hands, she enchanted them with tales of forest women who could transform into birds quick as the blink of a star. Of fairy folk no bigger than a thumb who rode cobalt dragonflies like stallions. Of a cave-vast cauldron forged by giants that allowed the dead to rise, so bright when lit that it burned your eyes.

Then the Woman of Flowers would share out wicker baskets loaded with jars of boiled sweets a hundred shades of hummingbird wings, and chocolate bars in burnished bronze wrappers. Children licked tiny fingers clean while parents wiped smudged faces.

There was a quiet girl in the crowd who clung to each word as if it was dipped in sticky honey. One day, the woman asked her for a story. She spoke with quivering lips about the monster that lived under her bed and how she was afraid of the dark. So, the Woman of Flowers made a solemn vow that no villager here would ever fear darkness again.

That night, the little girl was too overjoyed to get a wink of sleep beneath moonbeams like smudged chalk, and she did not enter the land of dreams. When dawn broke, she found her parents were gone. A single tawny feather rested on their pillow. Perhaps it was a jest? She searched the other cottages, she searched the fields, she searched the barn. Deserted. The village was empty. The only place left to check was the mill. She turned the handle. There was nothing inside except a flock of barn owls hooting at her from the rafters...

As her tears fell, the girl noticed the overpowering scent of meadowsweet blooms. She turned. The Woman of Flowers entered the mill.

“What have you done with my parents? They’re gone.”

The woman placed a buttercup-petal hand on her shoulder, and it melted her worries a little.



“I made a promise to you that no villager would ever fear darkness again. Remember?” The woman gazed up at the rafters. “So I visited their dreams and transformed everyone into owls—rulers of the nocturnal hours. I thought this would make you happy.”

What had she done?

“You did not visit me.” The girl’s lips trembled.

“When I tried to enter your dreams, I could not find you. That means you are still human and still afraid. It is not too late for you to be freed from fear, though.”

The girl realized she had lain awake all night with excitement, thinking the monster under her bed would be vanquished at last. “But you planted the seed of stories in me—now I have so many more that I want to make and hear and share. Owls do not tell stories.”

“The choice is yours,” the Woman of Flowers said with a honeyed smile. “Will you join us?”

Hesitating, the girl felt her heart break bit by bit, like leaves falling from a tree in autumn. She shook her head. “Not today.”

“Very well. I shall return at the same time each year and ask you the same question. Your parents will still be waiting for you. You have my word.”

The girl looked back as she left the mill and saw that the woman had vanished.

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Alys pours herself a whisky as her granddaughters return outside to play amid the maple leaves. The umber liquid scorches her tongue. She savours each sip. Beyond the windowpane, twilight brings a voice delicate as a feather, yet strong enough to make her heart soar.

To the sound of soft too-wit-too-woos, it says: “Join us, join us, join us.”

Soon, says Alys. She tapped her honeyed finger on her lips. Soon.