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The Visitors

By Rande Dawn

"Tell me a tale," I demanded of Máthair every night. I was a child, impatient and fretful. If I didn't ask, she might forget.

"Tá go leor agam," she always whispered back. I have many.

Tales tumbled from Ma's mouth like ripe fruit from a summer tree. She would pierce each one open with her voice, sending words flowing like juice, and me there to drink in every drop. I received my sweet portion at bedtime as part of the tuck-in ritual, but I had to wait in the near-

dark, burrowed and warm under one of her misshapen crocheted throws until she was ready. Eventually my bedroom door would swing wide and she'd stand in the in-between, a shadow blocking the hallway light. She would cross into my world, closing the door behind her and leaving us illuminated by nothing more than my nightlight – a ceramic fairy resting on her knees, head bowed, hands cupped in her lap. The fairy's wings pulsed with thin shifting colors. Ma would turn to English then, which I understood better. "Have you collected all my tales yet,

Fianna?"

"I'm trying," I'd insist.

She'd loop one of my dark unruly strands of hair around her fingers then, and tug gently.

"Well," she'd say. "I must give you some more."

When Máthair spoke, her stories were about everything: dreams and perfect nothingness, unimaginable beasts and soaring bright birds, worlds beyond this and lost creatures that ventured between one and the other. Her tales had no beginnings, no conclusions. They just were, as if she was in fact plucking them from unseen branches.

She would speak for a time with her musical lilt, then her voice would pause and the silence would stretch out. She might crane over me then, thick auburn hair whispering over my cheek. If I was not already lulled to sleep – and I became very good at not being so lulled – I would let my eyes fly open and in that moment see her as a creature from her stories.

"'Tis all for tonight, mo stór," she would finish. My treasure.

She never said, "The end."

One night when I was ten, I lay awake after she left, her tales twirling in my mind like the snow whipping outside my window. I was preparing to surrender to the dreams they would weave for me, reveling in the in-betweenness of being both awake and asleep.

Downstairs was quiet. Ma had returned to her endless quest of mastering knitting needles and Athair was composing on his piano, lost in his music and lost to all of us with earbuds in to deaden the noise. We had no guests that evening, which was unusual but not unheard of. Most nights back then our Dublin row house fairly bustled with strangers of every shape and size, guests that knocked long after I was expected to be asleep. But often I wasn't, so I listened for any signs of arrival. When I heard them, I slipped from my room on silent bare feet and crept halfway down the staircase to watch the adult world transpire through the railings, my toes curling in delight and wonder.

On this snowy night, when I was half gone to dreams, a pounding shook me awake. Our front door creaked open after a moment and a gust of icy wind swept up the staircase and into my room. My nose twitched as I caught the scent of pine and earth. Throwing back the covers, I was at the top of the staircase a moment later, still and watching.

Down in the foyer stood a man with a head of thick curly black hair like mine, his cheeks scarlet from the cold. Snow coated his boots and sweater like one of Máthair's terrible patchy blankets. He was clutching the wrist of a child with wild, reddish hair who was nearly swallowed by an adult-sized coat. Ma had come out to greet the man and their Irish was firing

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"An buachaill," I heard. Boy. "Tréigthe." Left behind. Forsaken. "Trioblóide." Trouble.

Ma retreated to the sitting room, out of view. I imagined her tapping Athair on the shoulder and him taking out his earbuds. I shifted my weight and the floor creaked. Both man and child glanced up the stairs. The sparkling green of the man's eyes made me gasp – it was a color not found in any crayon box – and instantly I knew he was special. Full of unseen. Yet he was familiar; we had met – but I couldn't pin down where.

He smiled at me so gently I wondered if my eyes were playing tricks.

The child – a boy – tugged his hand from the man's grip and shrugged off the coat like shedding a skin. He was outfitted in clothes that would have seemed unusual if I hadn't been spying on my parents' friends for years – not cloth but organic matter: leaves, bark, moss. He addressed the man in a stern voice, then ran up the stairs, pausing one step below where I stood glued to the floor.

"Taispeáin dom do nead," he said and it took a moment for me to understand.

Show me your nest.

Ma's stories were all different, but they were also all the same: they told of the glorious unseen, wondrous talents and miracles that we would have called magic if we'd been permitted to.

During my childhood, no one spoke of magic. Before I was born, Athair explained, there were people called magicians who pulled rabbits out of hats or scarves from sleeves. But before I was out of nappies, actual magic began appearing in our cities and towns, small bursts of strangeness that were either delightful or terrifying, depending on your perspective. Is an unknown high street that only appears between 2:33 and 2:48 in the center of a raging motorway playful ... or destructive? What of farmers who claimed their animals were speaking to one another, and not in Irish or English – but French?

The word came from our leaders: until we could control it, until we had mastery of unexplained happenings, magic was forbidden. During my youth, the very idea of trickery – even mere sleight of hand – could have you locked up by the Garda. Breathing of its existence outside our home asked for trouble; nosy neighbors were always ready to spy and report.

But inside our home the story was different. The strangers who visited – men, women and creatures of other races – were steeped in magic, in unseen. They gathered in our sitting room with my parents, firelight casting jumping shadows across their fine-featured faces and unruly, uncombed hair. They lay on the chairs and the settee and the floor, while others took their rest on the ceiling. They whispered words that made the fire bend and the room shake, words that were like Ma's version of Irish – differently shaped, softer, older than the kind I was learning in scoil.

Once comfortable and warm, they unleashed their unseen – a word that was closer to the true term Fae preferred – and reveled in it, growing competitive with the tricks they could pull. While I watched, one fashioned three-dimensional maps in the carpet; another made Athair's piano play on its own. A pair of visitors turned the entire room into a dark forest glade and

everybody got lost in it for almost the whole night. Once the ceiling rained unripe blueberries.

Another time a Fae grew a second version of himself that shouted the foulest words you've ever heard, then vanished. I preferred when they sang, voices turning the air above them into ribbons of color that streamed out the doorway. I breathed those colors in, hearing faint voices in my head that soon faded with the phenomenal hues.

"It's good to rest here," I heard one say once. "Nearly like back home."

But not all of the visitors could relax in our sitting room. These ones arrived in pairs or small groups, clutching towels or cloths around their heads and bodies. They looked furtive and tired and were often barefoot, casting suspicious glances everywhere – including up at me on the staircase.

"She's just come over," a family friend once told my parents, clutching the hand of a young woman with spiked hair and wide eyes. "An' is in need of docs." Documentation, I knew what that meant. We all had papers to say who we were and where we belonged and if we had been cleared of unseen in those years.

"This bunch slipped through an' left behind friends," a visitor said another time, gesturing at a couple I first took for twins whose skin seemed luminescent. "Can ye help their others tomorrow eve?"

A knock came from a solitary visitor one night who stared at Ma with empty eyes and skin the color of a dishrag. "Who am I now?" she asked, twisting a badly-knitted silver scarf in her hand. "Too long here. Everything is gone." They tried to bring her inside but she slipped into the fog and was not seen again.

"I'm going back," one young man told Máthair in a thin, hard voice as she swabbed down his scratched cheeks and set a frozen pack of broccoli on his eye. He'd been attacked the minute he came across the border by lurking humans who pelted him with rocks. "Warn Pádraig the way I came through's a dead route. It's forbidden."

"Y'didn't hurt them –" Athair began to ask.

One side of the man's face lifted in a half-smile that did not reach his eyes.

"No, no," Ma admonished. "Never strike back. They fear us too much already."

"Well," said the man, "those ones with the stones won't be tellin' anyone anything for a while.

'Less they come across somebody who speaks goose."

Ma sighed and sat back on her knees, hands in her lap, the same pose my fairy light held.

It was years before I learned why we had so many guests. We were a safe house, which I understood early on – but I did not know then that the border between Fae and Human was dissolving and taking the Fae worlds with it. I wasn't aware that these Fae only came because they had nowhere else to go; their lands, which had always been endless, were now finite and shrinking. There was no place for them but in our countries, where they were greeted with suspicion and violence. We didn't know how to live alongside them. Not for many years. All most of us had to give them was our fear.

But not all of us. Not Máthair. Not Athair. Not me.

Or, mostly not me.

"I don't have a nest," I told the red-haired boy that snowy night. "I have a bedroom."
I led him into the darkened room aglow with the colors of the ceramic fairy's pulsing wings. He strode straight to my nightlight and picked it up, examining it from all sides.

"Draíochta?" he asked, looking at me. Magic.

"Electricity," I corrected. "And you're not supposed to say that word here. Just say unseen."

"'Tis ugly," he said of the light. "And a lie." His face twisted and a clump of bark fell from his arm, revealing the shining skin beneath. He lifted the little fairy up high and dashed her to the ground, where she broke into chunks.

Now we had no light at all but I knew where he was and I launched myself at him, pounding on his back, his head, his arms, but it was like striking stone and I stopped after only a few blows. Falling back against the bed, fists aching and chest heaving, I promised myself I would not cry.

And then I did.

The mattress lowered next to me and I realized he was staring. His hand reached up to my face and I flinched, but not before he'd taken a tear onto a finger.

"Ah," he said. "Féach." Watch.

A sliver of light that had escaped from a corner of the shaded window slid across the floor like mercury and ran over his worn leather boots, then up his leg and into his palm. He cupped the light with his other hand and for a wink there was no light at all in the room.

Then he released it.

The light beamed skyward like a flower displaying its petals, painting the ceiling of my room with soft patterned white glow. Now I could make out his lightly freckled face and the remainder of his clothing, which seemed to be falling apart and dissolving as we sat there. He shivered once and I handed him Ma's crocheted throw from my bed. He wrapped it around his shoulders like a cape and nodded at me.

"I shouldn't be here," he said and I couldn't be certain if he was speaking English – or if I had somehow become fluent in his kind of Irish. It felt like the latter. It felt like unseen. "But it's terrible back home. Almost as terrible as here."

He didn't sound like a boy. He sounded much older.

"Home," I said. "Beyond." There were words for where he'd come from – his home, his beyond. But I didn't know the right name. Anyone who tried to call it Tír na nÓg with Ma always earned a laugh; its true name was one none of us could pronounce.

"It's not so beyond now," he said. "It'll be gone soon."

"You're safe here," I promised.

"Not really," he said. "I know of your unseen law. I know I won't obey it. It's a disaster for us."

"Why?"

He looked at me for a long moment. "You watch those who come to your home, don't you?"

Your visitors?"

I didn't know how he knew, but I nodded.

"Do they seem ... happy?"

I thought about this. "When they're here they do."

"Outside these walls they are not. They are not permitted to be themselves. Our world is

shrinking and there is less and less place for our kind. Your world is our only destination. But once we are here, we must hide. Be more like you."

"Why is that a disaster?" I asked. "This is our land."

"Another lie," he said roughly. "This was our home long before it became yours. We divided ourselves for a reason. But you are the visitors, not us."

I stared at the broken pieces on the floor and swung my feet slowly.

"Once we are here and told we must be like your kind, we begin to slowly strangle." He took a deep breath. "You had a visitor. She was lost. Came here, wandered away again. Yes?"

I nodded, thinking of the woman with her wrecked silver scarf, slipping into the fog.

"We know of her. She was one who left a very, very long time ago and stayed. Had a family. A job. And in time forgot who she was. By the time she came to your door, she was a shell." He folded his arms. "Did you hear what became of her?"

I shook my head.

"She filled her stomach with pebbles after she left your home. Sank herself in the river."

That didn't seem possible. "Fae don't die," I argued. "Do they?"

"We heal quickly if we can. But she was determined. She stayed down there an' drowned again and again before she could no longer heal herself."

Tears filled my eyes.

"Her name was –" and he sang a short melody with funny changes inside it that made the chair next to my bed rock and the lights flash. "She'd forgotten it by then." He shakes his head, red hair tumbling around like Ma's. "Take away our unseen and you steal the soul. Our soul." He paused. "Your Máthair's soul."

"No," I said. "Máthair is fine." But an uneasiness crept into me. I was sure I knew the truth: Ma was not from beyond. Ma was from here. Yet it was like swallowing moonlight to hear him suggest it. Something rested in my heart and flickered there.

"When the soul has no nourishment it dies," he said. "When we cannot do what we are meant to, we forget. We become ... less ourselves. Too long here and we forget who we were."

"So why did you come?"

He stared at the ceiling, then down at me. "They want me to play peacemaker. To teach your kind to be unafraid. To acknowledge the unseen within themselves. But also to convince our own kind to be patient. Tell them that this may take many years. Some of our folk believe in rising up, taking back what was once ours. This will never do. Most of us do not wish to fight your kind. That path does not end well."

"I'm not afraid," I said.

"Of course not," he said. "You're surrounded by draíochta. It's as much a part of you as this –" and he gave one of my curls a tug, like Ma would.

"It's in me?" I asked.

He nodded. "Almost all of your kind is born with it, but it needs waking up. Nurturing."

"Show me," I said in the softest voice I could imagine, eyes watering. "I want to know what I have."

He lifted my hand and placed it between both of his. "This I can do."

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Just then my bedroom door flew wide and in came everyone: Máthair, Athair and the dark-haired man. I recognized him now – he had once been a friend of Athair's. They made music together. We had photos and streaming videos of them playing in their band. But I hadn't seen him in years.

Ma pushed past the men and lifted me from the bed. I was far too big to be carried but she had no trouble with my size. I wriggled and pushed, but she held on tight. Athair flipped a switch and the light swallowed the glow on the ceiling.

"Cian," the dark-haired man said in a thunderous tone and the boy stood. Cian. His name.
"We're going."

"I might stay here," said Cian.

"You bloody well will not," said the man. "And you know why."

With a giant twist, I burst from Ma's arms and fell to the floor. "I like him," I said. "He can stay."
Cian smiled at me. "Y'see. An invitation."

"'Tis not Fianna's place to invite," said the man, putting out a trembling hand. "They are not going to stop looking for you. We have to keep moving."

"Pádraig," said Athair. "Stay. There's no harm for one evening."

"Shut it, Mal," said Pádraig. I knew the name now, from the credits on the records. His smile had been so sunny in those pictures. "I'll not bring this to your doorstep."

"You have already," said Ma. "'Tis too late. Cian can take the spare room and you the sofa. We'll slip you both out after the storm."

Pádraig gazed around the room at us and I could see the tired all over him. He was thinner than in the pictures, with darkness circling his eyes. His hands made fists and he rubbed his face. "It hurts me to be here," he said. "If I'd had any other choice –"

Ma rested a hand on his shoulder and he flinched. "Don't fight what is," she said. "Have some tea and get some rest." She glanced at me. "Fee, pull out some of your old clothes for Cian. He can stay –"

"In the chair," said Cian, nodding at the spare seat in my room. "I'll do just fine there. I'll keep watch."

Ma looked between the two of us and her mouth switched from side to side, and then she nodded. It took me many years to understand what kind of decision she was making. Then they all left.

Cian and I stood there a moment. I handed him a jumper and sweatpants, then turned my back while he changed. He chuckled at me. When I turned back around he was like any other boy I might know except for his long, fiery hair.

"Now," said Cian. "Where were we?"

I slept only a little that night, too wound up to return to Ma's tales and their twirling in my brain. Cian showed me the special talent – the special unseen – that I had to work with, and explained I would have to use it in secret. "But not forever," he said. "I promise."

When he finished, I got back under my covers and Cian took the chair, curled up and staring out at the snowstorm with Ma's blanket tucked around him. "I don't need to sleep," he said.

"But you do."

Cian was gone when I woke in the morning, Ma's throw gone with him. But on the side table next to my bed, my fairy was reassembled perfectly. Once again she kneeled, hands collected in her lap. But now her head was craned to the skies and her wings were gone. And when I next flipped her switch, the light that poured out was not colorful or pulsing – it was like a flower opening luminous petals on the ceiling, swirling endlessly.

I am grown now, or nearly so. I have nurtured my unseen and it is strong and sure now, though what I have done with it is a story for a very other day, as one of our visitors once said to me.

Cian and I have not crossed paths again, though I feel him everywhere. He came to our world to change hearts and minds, and he's been having slow success. Magic is carefully permitted in our land now, here and across the waters in England, Scotland and Wales. Places where it has always lived in stories and myths. Places full of people who want to believe.

But we are where things end: the rest of the world has our old fears, and we are sequestered.

Quarantined, as if we have a sickness. None of us leave these isles any more. Yet they still come, the ones like Cian. Like Pádraig. And yes, like Máthair. I understand her better now. They come and no longer try fit in, letting their magic burst forth like light released into the skies, uncontainable, endless. No longer unseen.

Too late for Máthair, though. She sits still and quiet these months, as if she's been emptied out. When I visit, I catch her staring out the window or sitting on her porch rocker for hours, barely stirring. I used to think I had stolen bits of her essence as a child – that for every tale she dispensed, she lost a little of her vitality. But recently I thought about Cian's words again. Too long here and we forget who we were.

I wonder if I can help her remember, just a bit. To keep her from swallowing stones. I visit her as often as I can, joining her on the settee. I reach over to tuck her still vibrant hair behind one ear and say, "I have a tale for you."

She turns to me in time and our eyes meet. Light always reflects in hers, a deep verdant green I have only ever seen in one other before. "Tell me a tale," she whispers. "All of mine have left me."

So I do.

And I never say, "The end."



Rande Dawn

Rande Dawn is an author, journalist, and mom to a sweet Terrier. She published her collection of dark speculative fiction stories, *Home for the Holidays* in 2014, and in 2009 co-authored & Order: *SVU Unofficial Companion*. Her short fiction has popped up in a number of publications.



podcasts, including 3AM Magazine ("The View of My Brother in the Rear-View Mirror," "Warm, In Your Coat") and Well-Told ("For the Holidays," "Can't Keep a Dead Man Down"). She is represented by Dunham Literary for her novel, *The One Worth Singing*, which is seeking publication. When not making Randeepublishes entertainment profiles, reviews and thin outlets including Variety, The Los Angeles Times, Today.com Magazine. She also blogs regularly at randeedawn.com.

Keep it Secret or it will Disappear

By Emma Grave

Aideen's boot crunched on the leaf litter for the umpteenth time, only this time, she sensed something was wrong. As her foot landed, the ground felt softer – not as supportive – and her step sounded strange.

With a low grumble, the earth quickly shifted, transforming the flat path ahead into a severe slope. Toppling forward on the uneven surface, Aideen instinctively stuck out her left arm to break her fall, scraping her bare skin. But she couldn't stop her momentum and slid down the newly formed – almost vertical – hill, landing in a deep hole at the bottom with a thud.

Aideen shielded her eyes from the midday sun overhead with her right arm. Her left sent a rolling wave of pain from wrist to shoulder whenever she moved it. She could see a tree overhanging the hole, a noisy black bird aiming chirrups down from its branch as though scolding something below.

Perhaps it's informing me how foolish I am, Aideen thought. Spending my first free day in ages searching for a myth in the forest.

Aideen was an apprentice smith for the esteemed Ennar Stelforg in the town of Blackwell, which sat on the outskirts of the forest of Chasia. Her favourite past-time – away from working up a sweat and some impressive arm muscles by the stifling forge – was drawing. Her preferred subjects were those native to Chasia; the many varieties of flora and fauna. When a group of hunters had passed through Blackwell, reporting a sighting of the baradwys – unseen in these parts in Aideen's lifetime – she'd quizzed them about the location and set off to find it the next chance she got.

Aideen checked the satchel slung across her body: its contents were undamaged. She heard a