

A Dream Vacation
a.k.a.
The Circling Circle of Circling Circles

A
Morgana Feldstone
Fritz Heinmillerstien
Joint

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June-July It Was a Good Year

Morgana

Linda was sleeping. It has a certain ring to it, don't you think? Linda was sleeping. How quaint? How darling? How special? Good for Linda. That's what I say. She tries so hard. And now and then, she could use a rest. She deserves it too, I might add. And so let it be known, Linda was sleeping.

Yet, even though this statement is fundamentally correct, and quite literally true, you might get more flavor--a better taste for the action, as it were--if we were to simply say: Linda is sleeping, and leave it at that.

Yes. Linda is sleeping. That sounds so much better. Brings it all into the moment. Makes the narrative spring to life.

So once again, Linda is sleeping... out in the open, under the sky, among a ring of stones. Stone hedges, I think they call them, but not The Stone Hedge, just one of the many magical vortexes, which dot the English countryside.

When you stop to think about it though, smack dab in the middle of a circle of boulders is not really the best place to be taking a nap, whether you are in the English countryside or not. I think they're nexuses or something, but what do I know? I mean, so what if rumor has it that strange things can--and in poor Linda's

case most definitely will--happen to any soul unfortunate enough to slumber within an open portal?

But then, maybe that sounds a bit too foreboding. Perhaps I should rephrase it a little. Tone it down a tad. When I said strange things would happen to poor Linda, what I really meant to say was that bad things, simply the most dreadful sort of things would occur to her. Oh, dear me. That doesn't sound any better at all. Not one little bit.

Maybe I should just go back to the facts. That sometimes helps... or even better yet, I could give an example of sorts and explain what I mean. Now granted, this is off the cuff, and not thoroughly vetted or researched, but from what I gather, falling asleep in a hedge of stones is for all practical purposes akin to falling asleep within a protective circle--or pentagram if you like--and then carelessly letting an arm, a leg, or simply a strand of hair fall across the chalk inscribed boundary, and thereby breaking any protective spell. There, I think that's something we can all relate to.

I guess what I am trying to say is that if you run off to England on some little holiday, you should probably take your friends along. Or if not that, at least let them know where you're going. I mean if they don't hear from you, if you don't drop them a line telling them of your intent; well then, when you don't show up for the weekly meeting of a little social club that us girls like to call The Coven... well, when that happens, I think it's safe to say that your friends might get a trifle worried. It's quite understandably really. There everyone is at the appointed time and the appointed place of the regularly scheduled weekly meeting--it's not a surprise you know--and you sister's are all set to go, but where are you? Or, perhaps should I say, where is Linda?

I'm sure you can imagine our concern. What could be the matter? What could have happened to poor, sweet, dear Linda? Surely only an unexpected calamity of the most grievous sort could possibly detain her and keep her away from the company of her loving and eternally caring sisters.

Needless to say, we flew off in search of her at once. And then, what do you know? We found her... asleep. Yes, still.

Relieved as we were to have been the first to find her... And if you will, please be so kind as to notice the tense. You don't think I would be so sloppy as to entrap myself? Anyhow, as relieved as we were, we realized at once that it would be foolish not to take care and put into place the most rudimentary of protective measures. What if others had found Linda first? Helpless and alone with nary a protective circle in sight, I dread to think of the consequences should an enemy of the order have found poor, dear, sweet, naïve Linda first.

But that was not the case. I am delighted to relate that this tale has a happy ending, and all our worries were for naught, for it was we, her sisters, who found Linda first. Such a silly little girl, asleep in the middle of a stone hedge... with no protection, and all of our secrets just sitting there waiting to be exposed. What could the foolish little girl possibly be thinking? What could have caused her to act in a manner so blatantly detrimental to her own self interests?

Perhaps a clue lies in her dreams?

Yes. Perhaps it does.

See how she tosses and turns. No doubt, her sleep is troubled. If I had to guess, I would say that she looks like she might be possessed, haunted by ghosts... or perhaps the fairies of the circle have come seeking revenge.

No matter.

There is no need to fret poor child.

Your sisters are here now, so sleep well my dear.

You have nothing to fear, absolutely nothing.

If we all pull together, I'm sure we'll see you through this. If the past is any indication of the future that is...

Morgana

The English countryside IS a sight to behold and one that everyone should experience at least once... if only vicariously.

So let's take a moment to look around and take in the sights. Behind us on the hill are the ruins of the famous Heinmillerstien Abbey. I understand the place burned down during a particularly nasty divorce and was never rebuilt. Quite the tragedy, but I'm sure we'll get to that shortly. Below us to the left are the infamous Feldstone Woods. I hear that they are haunted, but perhaps that is just a rumor I'm starting for my own amusement. Fairy Home Gardens is straight ahead down the hill--and I think a name like that says it all--while a little to the right, past a nice easy field filled with coarse yellow burse and inviting bluebells is the quaint little village of Covensville.

Now, I know what some of you are thinking, but I assure you these are the actual place names. In fact, all of the names in this story are completely accurate--except for the names of the ghosts, but then, you know how litigious those guys are. Anyhow, if the names are sounding made up, it's probably because in some sense they are, but not in the sense you might at first imagine. You see, we are in the astral, and it is here that we--or at least Linda--shall remain. As such, it is not London that resides several hundred miles to the south, but the bustling burg of Lang'dan, which in this world can only be reached via carriage. This last is a fact that is not wholly important in and of itself, but the greater concept remains. If you create a place, you get to name it. Fair's fair after all.

What is perhaps unfortunate is that although this is all laid out before Linda as plain as day, I do not expect that she will ever connect the dots or untangle the knot.

C'est la vie, or should I say, C'est la die.

Morgana

I feel that I am not getting anywhere, that I remain stagnated and still, for we remain exactly where we started, and Linda is still

sleeping under the open sky in a circle of stones, a stone hedge if you will. However, although Linda sleeps--a fact that I shall not bore you with again--she opens her eyes, stretches, and yawns all the same.

It is a glorious day, one of those glorious English days, which--for whatever quirk of fate--always have a way of unexpectedly turning to rain. It is just as poor Linda opens her eyes that the first drop of rain lands squarely on the bridge of her nose splattering her face. It is one of those big juicy drops--quite cold really--and the icy sensation startles her. It had been so sunny. Hadn't it? But then the morning seems so long ago. And was it even a morning? Let alone this morning?

Linda certainly would like a moment to think and clear the fog from her head, but the weather will have none of that. In moments the clouds open up and before she even gets to her feet, Linda is soaked to the bone, through and through.

#

To make matters worse, it would appear that the place Linda has chosen to nap is nothing more than a muddy hole in the ground. I like to think of it as a grave of sorts, but others may note that between the shovels and buckets, colored ropes and stakes, it looks more like an archeological dig. You know how they're always studying this and studying that at these magical vortexes and hedges of stone.

If the weather were not so inclement, Linda might--once again--have paused to look around and take note, but as it is, the weather is quite terrible. The wind is blowing. The rain is falling in thick sheets, and the aforementioned fog is rolling in obscuring all that it covers.

Instinctually Linda realizes that she must get back to town before the fog envelopes her fully, or all will most certainly be lost... perhaps forever.

Thus without thinking things through, she scrambles out of the pit ringed by the stones, and runs blindly towards the quaint little hamlet of Covensville.

#

This might be a good place to go into the wonders of England, or remark on how they do seem to pack quite a bit of country into the English countryside, so as Linda's splashing footsteps keep time, you may wish to look around at the beautiful flowers in bloom, the leaves on the trees just budding out, and the delightful cry of the birds. I mean, if no one else, the birds do seem to be enjoying the rain. They seem so happy and delighted with it... or perhaps, for some unknown reason, they have taken a dislike to Linda--wretched, disagreeable girl that she is--and delight in her suffering and pain.

I, myself, do not care for the rain so much, and as such we will not rejoin poor, dear, sweet, and now terribly--icy--cold Linda until she makes her way to the edge of town and finds a slender eve under which she may stand, shiver, and shake most pathetically.

#

The eve is a blessing of sorts, for it serves little purpose, but it is a place where Linda can stop and confer with her map as she tries to decipher where she is and where she needs to go.

Needless to say without a destination in mind, the map is useless, but even with a destination, this particular map would be less than helpful.

And perhaps equally trivial, but no less enjoyable, is Linda's sudden realization--brought into focus in no small part by the constant flow of water surrounding her--that the second pot of tea which she had with lunch was probably a mistake.

#

Can you see Linda's mind spinning in a whirl? What with being in a dream and not realizing it; feeling the pains of urgency from that second pot of tea--a whole second pot no less--with nary a restroom in sight; shivering cold on the edge of hypothermia even though the air itself is thick and full with the smell of warm fires that surely must be burning in nearly every building; and desperately trying to make some sort of sense out of the flowing water, cracks in the sidewalk, and ever changing street signs, while pouring over a map that is patently worthless; considering it all, I am quite sure that you can see the numerous obstacles to sustained concentration.

Then add to this the horses and carriages that go whizzing by--on the wrong side of the street no less--as they cast up great sheets of water with their wheels, while none of those walking--or more accurately running--down the street will stop to chat or provide directions in the torrential downpour; and you get a sense how lost poor frightened Linda must feel.

Truly she is helpless in a foreign land, isolated, alone, and completely unaware of the boundless depths of her troubles.

Morgana # #

“Bit of rain we seem to be having, eh?”

Linda nearly jumps out of her shoes from the sound of the voice.

“No need to be frightened. I'm just an old man,” the near ghost like apparition insists. “Maybe I can help you,” he continues as he notices the map in Linda's hands. “Where are you going?”

Ah... such a good question.

“I don't know,” Linda admits.

“Well, you've come from the ruins...” the man begins, but Linda cuts him off, “I was at the stones.”

“Oh. Is that a fact?” the kindly old gentleman replies. “I had thought...” but really, the thoughts of a senile old man who doesn’t even know that he is a ghost is hardly worth relating and certainly could not possibly be of any consequence. “Well, if you haven’t been, then you should,” the ghost concludes.

“Maybe some other day,” Linda suggests as she indicates the rain, and takes a moment to shiver uncontrollably.

“Right. Of course. Forgive me. What you’ll be wanting is a raincoat...”

“Or a fire,” Linda suggests hopefully.

“I dare say you’ll find that in any of the shops,” the old man observes, and then being the meddlesome (i.e. the gallant and helpful) sort, escorts Linda to a portal, or a doorway if you will, through which he cannot possibly hope to follow.

###

Once inside, Linda immediately forgets about the ghost and makes a beeline for the roaring fire that is ablaze in--where else but--the fireplace. Such comfort, such warmth. It is for these little things, these little pleasures that make life worth living. No matter the smoke that fills the room, burns the eyes, and chokes the throat: at times like this, all that matters is the next moment, of survival.

“It’s for paying customers,” the shrew, gnome like, worm of a man from behind the counter says as he hops off of his stool and jumps to the ground. Just as soon as his stumpy little legs will carry him he rushes over to Linda, and tries--quite ineffectually I might add--to push her away from the warmth of the fire. “Paying customer’s only,” insists the enraged--and perhaps slightly deranged--midget.

There is no way Linda is going to move away from the warmth of that flame, not if she has anything to say about it, so as the gnome tries to push her away, she desperately reaches for her purse in search of a coin only to find that her handbag is gone.

“Try your pockets,” Fritz, as the short balding, beer bellied gnome is called, suggests.

Not thinking on the missing purse for too long--and neither should you--Linda searches her pockets and quickly finds a glimmering gold coin.

“That’s it. That’s it,” Fritz urges. “One gold coin. It’s magic you know. Take your pick. Anything in the shop.”

#

Anything in the shop? What an offer? What a preposterous suggestion? What a way to throw a wrench in the works monkey boy?

If Linda were to listen to the wretched gnome, who knows what trouble that might cause for us and the solidarity of our sisterhood, but as luck would have it, Linda does not trust the horrid, diminutive, weasel looking man, and let’s all awareness of him fall from her mind as she lets her gaze travel around the shop as she takes in all of the wonders of creation, which the little store contains. All of your heart’s desires from the farthest reaches of the Astral Ocean straight to the tips of your fingers my friends, ready and waiting at your disposal. And then there is the more mundane fare.

Piled high on flimsy wooden shelves that threaten to snap at the weight are every type of jam and jelly one could possibly imagine: fig spreads, pickled mustards, mint sauces thick with herbs, ginger chutney, and so on and so forth. Stacks of canned char, and smoked smelt are balanced precariously on overburdened tables, next to bars of cinnamon laced toffee, and delicate chocolate truffles.

Think of it as a test if you will. Are you willing to fall victim to the pleasures of the flesh? And its needs and desires?

“Hungry?” Fritz asks eagerly, but it is too soon since Linda has eaten and although she is sorely tempted by the bounty before her, she somehow finds the will to resist.

“Then how about a little souvenir?” the dwarf of a man asks gamely as he redirects Linda’s attention to a wall of postcards, key chains, refrigerator magnets, and other staples of the tourist trade. As she explores the treasures that abound, she finds unobtrusively nestled among the rubbish a miniature replica of Stone Hedge constructed of the finest of jewels and crystals. Need I mention that the glorious construction immediately catches Linda’s eye.

“I probably should just put that in the back room,” Fritz mutters to himself as Linda traces the jewels with her fingers. “It’s just for show. You can’t afford it.”

“But it’s so beautiful.”

“True. True,” Fritz agrees. “But I can’t sell it to you,” the gnome admits as he walks over towards the window and beckons Linda to follow. “Let me show you something.”

Fritz

Yeah. Yeah. Thanks.

You know it’s just like a witch to leave an important item out of the pot and then turn the thing over to you when she notices that it needs adding. It’s akin to mixing up a batch of dough, spooning out lumps of batter onto a cookie sheet, putting the delectable morsels into the oven, and then wiping your hands clean of the entire thing, while calling over your shoulder, “Oh, I think I might have forgotten the chocolate chips.”

Like I’m supposed to be able to salvage it and make chocolate chip cookies out of it, then.

This is why we got divorced you know. She--Morgana--is always doing sloppily executed... crap like this. Don’t get me wrong, I love her to death, but come on, enough is enough.

So where were we?

Oh, yeah. The tree.

###

“That’s Mortimer,” Fritz says as he points outside from the safety of the store window at an old oak tree that stands in the middle of the town square.

Perhaps it would be best if you would inhale deeply and enjoy the feel of crisp clean smoke from the burning wood in the fireplace for a moment of, and notice the crunch of sawdust on the old wooden floor beneath your feet, while you consider what this might mean to a tree... as if one might care what a stupid, ignorant tree might think.

I mean... as if?

“Who? What?” Linda asks suddenly thrown off balance by the changing shift in the air.

“The tree. See the tree?” Fritz says as he points out the window--and I feel it is only fair to mention that I’m not nearly as short, potbellied, or balding as Morgana would have you believe. I actually quite handsome... in my own way, but enough about me.

“The tree’s name is Mortimer,” Fritz continues, and rather than rushing you into this store, that ghost of an old man was supposed to show you that tree out there first. You know, that tree, right there. The one that almost looks like it’s in jail--its limbs being held up by iron bars and ugly supports as it is--and then after the ghost had left, “that manacled tree on the edge of death was supposed to tell you that that old man was a ghost,” because although you and I might know this, until it is mentioned, Linda does not.

“Really?”

“Yes. Really,” Fritz agrees in what can only be taken as a sarcastic tone. “You were also supposed to throw away your map into a bin as well,” he says hopefully, if unexpectantly.

For a stranger this gnome certainly seems familiar. He almost looks like... but no it couldn’t be. And rather than allowing Linda to go down that particular tract and recover her footing, for some unexplained reason, Linda merely says, “Why would I throw away my map?”

“Because it’s no good,” Fritz replies matter-of-factly. “You throw it away. I pick it out of the trash, only to sell it to you again later.”

“Oh...” Linda says, not really understanding, but then following along enough to make sure that the map is securely tucked deep down in her back pocket.

“Oh, no. Don’t be doing that to me,” Fritz complains with apparent annoyance. “Just hand it over.”

“I think I’ll just hang on to it if you don’t mind.”

“But I do mind,” Fritz replies with more than a bit of malfeasance in his eyes. “You see, I really do mind.”

###

“Maybe, I should just go,” Linda says worriedly as she backs away towards the door. Cold wind or not, she is suddenly very--very--uncomfortable inside this shop with this very--very--strange gnome... What is a gnome anyway?

“Don’t be like that,” Fritz coos as he corners the girl. “Surely there must be something in here you want... a sandwich, maybe the restroom,” he suggests hopefully. Damn the consequences. Who knows how many iterations it’s been? Clearly the spell is becoming unraveled. “That second pot is probably kicking in...”

How did he know that? “No really, I should be...” but then Linda stops cold. Fritz--his eyes ablaze with evil--is holding a pair of magical earrings in his hands. You’ve probably seen them, those pewter things made to look like fairies, only the pair Fritz is holding is the real thing: fairies made to look like pewter.

###

“Want it?” Fritz asks sweetly as he approaches the frozen Linda. “Want it?” he repeats provocatively as he shakes the pair of earrings violently causing them to turn into one of those factory

sealed blister packs filled with a matching set of fairy miniatures: hand painted, with 157 moving points of articulation, nearly--or really most completely--indistinguishable from the real thing--seeing as how they are one and the same.

However, if all of this should somehow prove too confusing, please rest assured that they are merely the ordinary type of collectables that they tend to carry in these resort towns. I'm sure you've seen them before in your travels.

#

No?

Well, no matter.

#

As Fritz shakes the package and casually walks towards Linda, the fairies in the blister pack come to life as they yell and scream.

“Help us!”

“Save us!”

Petrified by the magic of the moment, paralyzed by the unseen hand of her sisters, Linda watches on helplessly as Fritz presses against her, and somehow manages to seem to tower over her. No mean feat when one has been given the body of a midget sized gnome to work with I might add.

#

“You want them, don't you?” Fritz asks again as he glares at the girl with evil intent. I hope I don't have to tell you that Linda is suitably intimidated, but her desire for the fairies wins out and she finds a way to overcome her fear.

“How much?” Linda asks simply when she finally finds her voice.

“Just the one coin,” Fritz replies fairly. “Just the one.”

In her haste to hand over the coin, Linda fumbles, and then drops the coin. It falls on the floor where it dances and spins, and then proceeds to roll around in a circle like a rodeo clown, but Linda does not wait for the coin to come to a halt, nor does she watch as the gnome scrambles after the valuable symbol of agreement--it being the coin of the realm as it where--as it rolls behind the counter, under a table, and finally comes to rest in the corner behind a pile of yarn. Rather, her eye on the prize, Linda grabs the package of fairies and bolts out the door.

#

Alone, gold coin in hand, Fritz looks toward the fireplace and the roaring blaze going strong within. Seen in the right light, from the right angle, and in the right way, you can see the eyes of Morgana or one of her sisters peering back from the flames, and it is to this visage that Fritz addresses his remarks, “I pulled it together this time, but let’s try to keep this thing on track from here on out. Shall we?”

Morgana # #

Fritz would like you to think that he has somehow saved the day, that through quick thinking he has somehow managed to patch a hole that begun to unraveling in the circle, but the first is the last and the last shall be the first. It cannot be any other way. And so you see, it has always been as it is... and as it always shall be.

No matter how much one might have preferred that Linda were to have talked with Mortimer before freeing the fairies, it will work out just the same, and all will be well. In the long run, it cannot make the slightest bit of difference that the accursed fairies have regained their freedom a bit early. I am sure this unfortunate turn of events cannot possibly last.

#

Warmed from the fire and the kindness of doing a good deed, Linda hardly notices the rain as she dashes from Fritz's store. In fact, she has to admit that the rain does the place good. A sheen of water seems to bring the olive-grey slate--of which all of the buildings seem to be built--to life and causes the gardens to shimmer and glow.

She had not noticed the gardens before. All around, in every patch of dirt, on fence tops, window boxes, and pots by the door, there are flowers and colorful shrubs everywhere--with fairies hard at work tending them.

"If we didn't add a bit of color, you'd die from the monotony of it all," one of the fairies flying next to Linda suggests.

"It would be dreadfully dull," the other agrees, "simply dreadful."

#

Linda stops mid step. It really is too much for her. Ghosts, gnomes, and now this, talking fairies flying by her side.

"You're in a dream," one of the fairies supplies--and although I am sure they have names, you know how it is, one fairy looks pretty much like the next, and they tend to swarm, flit about, and never stay still, so even if you knew who you were talking to one second, you wouldn't the next.

As if this were some sort of cue, the air surrounding Linda suddenly fills with the beautiful creatures, and yes, even I will admit that they are beautiful--pure visions of loveliness. Imagine if you will Linda's delight in suddenly finding herself within a swarming cloud of shimmering blooms and swirling petals caught by the wind--or fairies as they tend to call themselves to those with the sight.

Of course, I think you would be disappointed if I let the wonder of the moment last, so as Linda is standing there staring like a hick tourist at the magical world around her, me and the sisters will do another lap around the town square, kick up some dirt, and mix things up.

#

In other words, a pack of black hooded riders suddenly go galloping by. The fairies have only enough time to lift Linda out of the way and toss her back onto the sidewalk before the riders are gone. To the untrained eye, it may seem like a close call, but had we wished to run dear, sweet Linda over, rest assured that we would have. All it would take is rounding the corner just a moment sooner.

With that in mind, perhaps we should speed it up girls. Maybe we'll get her next time...

#

Still reeling from the horses--as her mind seeks to make some sense of their sudden arrival and departure, as if these sort of things ever make sense--a great gilded coach rounds the corner and brings up the rear. I believe this would be the famed carriage of Lady Morgana, such a delightful ruler, admired and loved by ALL her people. A sentiment I simply must dare you to defy.

"Out of the way," Morgana's driver's yell as pedestrians scramble for the safety of the walk, and great sheets of water are thrown up by the wheels. The secret to this, of course, is not to go straight into the puddles, but to merely to let the wheels sheer at their edges. You get a better effect that way. It's much like diving into a pool. Any fool can jump into the water, but to send water splashing over the edge onto the sunbathers lining the way, this takes skill, practice, and in my particular case, a nature talent for mayhem.

#

“I’m soaked,” Linda remarks.

“It doesn’t matter, it’s just a dream,” one of the fairies reminds her.

“Hey! You’re stealing my lines,” a booming voice announces from behind them.

“Mortimer?” Linda asks questioningly as she turns around--and she really must have gotten turned around quite a bit, for she had not recalled being anywhere near the tree a moment ago.

“It is I, the one and only,” Mort agrees as he takes a slight bow. Due to all of the metal pipes, rods, and girders holding up his limbs, the motion is very slight indeed, and to a lesser eye it might have appeared as but a reaction to the breeze, but if you are to get anywhere in this world, you at least need to be able to recognize a bow for a bow, and a promise of fealty for the boon that it is.

Fritz # #

“Oh, No! Not again,” Fritz says as he comes running out of his shop. And is it just me, or does Fritz just keep on getting handsomer and handsomer every time he appears.

“Don’t worry. Just stand under my branches,” Mortimer assures Linda as he spreads his limbs protectively--as if a tree in a full body cast can be protective of anything. “He can’t harm you here. You’ll be safe.”

“I’m not trying to harm you,” Fritz insists, but it seems unlikely anyone will believe him at the moment, so instead of saying anything further, the gnome takes the opportunity to bend over and catch his breath as he hyperventilates. While doing this, Fritz notices the strong smell of...

“Lavender,” Mort supplies. “I like to carpet the ground around my roots with lavender, mint... sometimes a bit of rosemary

or thyme,” and even as he says this, another flock of fairies arrives, flowers and twigs in hand.

“It’s nice,” Fritz agrees as he inhales and takes in another gasping breath.

“Yes, very,” Linda says echoing the sentiment.

“Thank you. You’re very kind...” but Mort is cut off by a squeaky high pitched, “A-hem.” And so, the old battered oak tree observers rather diplomatically, “I couldn’t have done it without the fairies.”

#

It is all fine and dandy to pass a rainy day in idle chitchat under the broken limbs of a half dead tree, and if you care, you may stay and listen for as long as you like. I’m sure Mortimer is just bursting with desire to relate some ghastly little story regarding the origination of the ruins. Something about how the Abbey’s sawmill bursting into flames one night, and how the flames quickly spread burning the entire compound to the ground. It probably wouldn’t be half as interesting a tale if a good deal of the townsfolk hadn’t been present for a party at the time--some colossal mistake of a wedding or something--and got burned to a crisp with the rest; but really, this is all ancient history. Pick up a guide book if you are interested.

#

“That’s a horrible story,” Linda remarks.

“Yes... quite,” Mortimer agrees.

“Fine, fine,” you’ve said your bit, Fritz observes after a moment. It is time to move things along, so he turns to Linda and asks, “Have you given any thought to what you’d like to do for the rest of the day?”

Linda looks uncertainly at the drenching rain. Everything and everyone beyond Mortimer’s reach is getting soaked.

“It’ll pass,” Fritz assures her. “Oh, I mean,” and believe it or not, I almost forgot. “I’ve got a raincoat in the shop, I could let you have it.” I think I’m supposed make sure you get one here, at this juncture. I mean, I don’t like this weather any more than you.

But while Fritz is apparently fumbling about, Mortimer takes decisive action and drops a raincoat into Linda’s lap. Don’t ask me what a tree is doing with a raincoat, but for some reason it looks familiar to Linda.

“Is this mine?” she asks.

“I do believe so,” Mortimer agrees. “I got it from Luigi.”

“Who?”

###

“No! No! You can’t do this,” Fritz insists as he rises to his feet and allows his face to turn that cute cheery red color gnomes get whenever they are being cheated of their fun and glory--or want others to think that this is the case.

“Don’t worry about him,” Mort continues. “If you wear the coat, it won’t rain. This place is odd that way.”

“No! That’s not it at all,” Fritz stammers. “You have to buy the coat!” You see, it’s a carefully thought out enchantment. The coat is guaranteed to be waterproof, but since it is so much cheaper to provide a sunny day, then it is to provide an actual waterproof coat, wearing the coat insures that it won’t rain.

Trust me. It’s well laid out, and in there somewhere if you wish to look for it, but rather than waiting for Fritz to verbalize the components of the twist in any sensible manner, Linda puts the coat on all willy-nilly. Just like that.

And what do you know? It works. It suddenly stops raining.

###

“This is pretty handy,” Linda observes as she looks around from inside the comfort of her rainproof coat--you know, a coat which is guaranteed to keep you dry or something like that.

More important than the semantics of the event, is the fact that the sun has come out and the whole world sparkles in that special way things do right after a torrential downpour. Heck, there might even be a rainbow in the sky, but I’ve never bothered to look for it. I always seem to be preoccupied with something more important...

#

“Right. Right,” Fritz continues. Time to get this show on the road. “It’s all quite beautiful, charming really. Shame to waste such a day. I can see, you’ll be wanting to take in the sights then. Can I sell you a map for a walking tour?” he says reflexively. The mark up on those things is unreal. It’s not as if you’d need directions simply to go for a stroll and wander at random.

“No thanks,” Linda replies politely as she checks her pocket. “I think I have it covered.”

“Let us show you The Gardens,” the original pair of fairies urge. “You won’t regret it.”

“No!” Fritz yells. “I mean, no... or yes. I could show you the gardens. Maybe you would like to rent a carriage, or some horses. I mean, if not for now, then maybe later.” You know, perhaps for the next time that you’re coming back into town in a heavy rain.

Oblivious to Fritz’s helpful suggestion, the fairies continue their conversation with Linda directly. “We can show you the way,” the fairies insist.

“I think I’ll be alright,” Linda replies to Fritz, as she lets the fairies guide her away.

“No. You can’t just walk off like that,” Fritz calls after her. “I haven’t done my sales pitch yet,” but Linda is gone, and no longer within hearing.

#

“What about our sponsors?” Fritz says softly, almost pitifully to himself. “I never get to do my sales pitch.”

“I’ll listen,” Mortimer suggests helpfully. “What do you have in there that a tree might like to do on holiday.”

Ever the game one, Fritz pulls out a thick sheaf of brochures. “How about a steamboat ride? Have you ever wanted to spend a day cruising up and down the lake on a steamboat Mort?”

“Doesn’t seem like it would be my style,” Mortimer concedes.

“How about a hot air balloon then?” Fritz suggests as he shuffles through to the next brochure in the stack.

“High above it all?” the tree muses. “Floating free in the fresh air?”

Who knows? I suppose in a dream anything is possible.

Morgana # #

And I’m the one who is carelessly mucking things up? A dimwitted tree taking a hot air balloon ride? As if?

Let’s just get down to business, shall we?

What you’ll be wanting to note in this next section is all of the flowers and container gardens around town. Don’t ask me why, but Linda seems to be drawn to them, as well as the patterns in... well everything. The stone walls, the sidewalks, the way the sunlight glints off of the cobblestone street. Her mind just zooms in on these things and tries to make some sort of sense out of them.

Helpful in its own way to be sure, but also distracting. Really, in the end it is neither good nor bad. It is just the way some mind’s work. However, it does go a long way towards explaining why, when Linda stops to look at a roadside garden, full of moss and short slender flowers, she starts to grow dizzy and faint.

And here you will notice--if you look and pay attention--the echoes from the first iteration of the enchantment as they reflect back and bounce off of the boundaries that we--meaning the sisterhood--have installed; and see how, from Linda's perspective, it almost looks as though the butterflies and bees busy in the flower beds have taken on another form--of miniature magical sharecroppers.

They are, of course, more fairies--or more specifically--the first fairies as it were.

#

Isn't it delightful the way the world dances gaily in the morning sun? But then, is it the morning? Or is it the afternoon? I forget.

No matter, as Linda watches on--completely captivated by the moment--sunlight glistens through the bright otherworldly drops of water that cling to everything, give the world a sharp magical hue, and an overriding mystical edge.

And then, without further ado or preamble, but with the aid of her newfound fluttering friends, the flowers grow tall around Linda, like a little pastel forest grown large unto itself; and it is into this that Linda's mind falls helplessly, end over end, for ever and ever--just like the mind of a good little girl should.

#

So you see, it is simple. One moment Linda is staring into the visage of a mundane roadside garden, and the next she is falling into the moment, only to look around to find herself someplace new and all together different.

It really is a most convenient--and economical--way to travel, but then, when it eventually comes time to retrace your steps and go home, it might be a tad more difficult than if you had simply

paid attention every step of the way... or followed a well charted course.

Those walking tour maps might be expensive and ridiculously overpriced, but all you have to do is get lost once, and you'll understand their true worth, but I digress.

Now, where were we?

###

A small grouping of flowers in a roadside garden taking on the form of a stone hedge. That's where we are.

"Flowers like a stone hedge," Linda repeats to herself as she falls into the moment.

"What?"

"Oh, yeah," the fairies agree as they take over the conversation.

"Stone Hedge..."

"More like flower hedge," another fairy points out as the swarm rises to dance with Linda.

"Wouldn't that just be a hedge," another comments glibly as it joins the fray.

"But you can't just call it hedge," another retorts.

"Hence the name," of our destination, "The Garden," yet another replies testily.

"Don't be rude," a last of their number scolds, and truthfully, at this point I've lost track of whether this is the first fairy talking again, or yet another one of the thousands that surround poor, dear, sweet, Linda--as they blur her mind, obscure her surroundings, and incase her in a cloud of confusion.

###

Not that the individual fairies matter. This fairy. That fairy. They all look the same, but one way or another, after a bit, one of the more helpful amongst them will eventually bring the

conversation around to the heart of the matter and say, “This is The Garden of the Fairy Queen,” and then the flock will begin to fall away and slowly reveal the scenery.

At which point, I should pause and mention that I am beginning to become concerned about poor Linda. She doesn’t seem to be sleeping properly. Here it is in the middle of the day and she’s a bit groggy, a bit dull, for she repeats the name of the place quite inanely as if she couldn’t believe that she had heard it correctly the first time, “The Fairy Queen’s Garden?”

See what I mean? Clearly she is tired. Her voice is more than a bit flat. But the truth of the matter is, what with being in The Garden of the Fairy Queen again, for poor Linda everything at the moment is a bit boring, tedious, and in a word, repetitive. I mean, once you’ve seen one Fairy Queen’s garden, you’ve seen them all. And how many times has she seen the one?

So perhaps we should just fade out for a second, and give Linda a moment to catch her breath and get her bearings, or things could get tiresome.

Or more to the point, listening to a thousand fairies each giving their two cents worth on every topic in creation...

“You must see this.”

“Oh, no Linda. Come see this.”

“Here Linda. Here.

I think you get the point. What with all that running around, and the squeaky voices of the fairies... I mean, is it just me, or do you find those chirping high pitched squeals more than just a wee bit annoying as well? I confess, the little buggers are giving me a headache right quick.

###

So for our sake, if nothing else, we will fade the fairies out for a moment and let the cacophony of their voices fall below the threshold of perception as we allow Linda’s attention to wander hither and thither, this way and that.

Linda looks around, as if for the first time in a long while, and as she does one thing is most abundantly clear. She is no longer in Kansas... or any town, city, country, or village that she knows of. The fairies were quite correct when they had called this place a garden... It is the most beautiful place Linda has ever seen, full of magnificence and wonder.

Had this been the first stop, of the first loop, you would really have to pause for a moment to wonder at Linda's open acceptance of all the magic and enchantment, which surrounds her... but then, we've already been into that. This is all but a dream--merely a trifle to be enjoyed.

And Linda has been here many times before.

###

If you've ever been to an English garden, then you know the score. If not, picture a large square plot--perhaps the size of a cluster of tennis courts--surrounded by an aged brick wall about twelve feet tall. Nothing magical in the number, I assure you. And in fact, the wall is not wholly important. What with all the trees, bushes, shrubs, and flowers in the way, it is downright difficult to perceive that it is even there. A good barrier is like that you know.

And not to change the subject, but talk about flowers. This is the garden where the fairies preserve their seed stock and cultivate their national collection, you know. Don't ask me what that means exactly...

###

Well, I suppose I have some idea. It means if you want a snap dragon that snaps, then this is the place to go. They're dangerous to be sure, and you have to sign a liability release, but if you want one, this is the place.

Of course, if you're into death defying gardening, what you'll really need is a red flowering cycla-mean. It's nothing but an ugly

shrub of a bush with a bad attitude, but on the bright side, every single branch--and there are thousands of them--is tipped by a brilliant flower sporting razor sharp teeth. Once again, don't ask me why the fairies tend to go for these vicious carnivorous plants. It would be better to let them all die out if you ask me--the fairies, the plants, whatever.

Anyway, then there are the mundanes, the bug-n-dillias, two-lips, day-Zs, and the like, but really, why anyone would be spending any time looking at the flowers with all those fairies darting about, I have no idea.

#

Now I remember, that annoying high pitched whine--like nails on a chalkboard--that the fairies call talking, or--in a bit of ironic cruelty--singing.

“Come here Linda.”

“Let me show you this Linda.”

“This way. This way.”

“I'm next.”

Yes, there must be a million-zillion fairies in this measly one acre garden, and each one--of the delightful little things--wants to show Linda this flower or that. The only real bright spot in all of this is that the next fairy invariably wants to show poor, dear, sweet Linda a flower that is all the way over--and I do mean all the way over--on the opposite side of the garden. It's a pleasant little consolation prize, and Linda is getting quite the work out as she darts back and forth, zigzagging this way and that.

Don't get me wrong. The flowers are wonderful, simply divine, but after awhile enough is enough, and one must simply pause and take a break.

“I must catch my breath,” Linda begs of her hosts after she has had--and you will excuse me for the repetition--enough.

“But you haven't seen the glad-to-know-ya's.”

“Or the water gardens.”

“Or the trees...”

But then a sudden hush sweeps over the garden, and all of the fairies fluttering about in the air part and make way, and those on the grassy lawn bow low. The Fairy Queen and her entourage have appeared.

#

Fairies are egotistical little things.

The queen flies through the air with a hummingbird escort, butterflies at her side, and all the rest; and wouldn't you just know it, Linda is just enchanted. So beautiful! So regal!

What can Linda do but curtsy like a subservient little girl and bow low? Clearly she is in the presence of greatness, or at least those greater than her.

“Oh, you don't have to do that my child,” the queen chatters gaily. “We are all quite indebted to you for our freedom.”

And although freeing a pair of fairies from captivity might not seem like much, in these things--and in these places especially--it is the thought that counts.

All the same, Linda insists--quite correctly too I might add, “I really didn't do anything.”

And if we were in Alice in Wonderland, that would be that. Nothing? Well then, OK. But we are not in Wonderland, Linda is not Alice, and the fairies are most eternally grateful... I suppose eternally having a slightly different meaning to a fairy--fickly fell beasts that they are--than it might to you or me, but no matter. It is what it is.

“How can we ever thank you?” the queen asks.

Yes. How indeed?

#

Now, I don't know if I've ever mentioned it, but Linda did have that second pot of tea with lunch, and I'll repeat it again

because it bears mentioning. It was a whole second pot, not cup, but a pot, and well, it has been a while. Let's just say that even though she's getting a bit tired from running around the garden and might like to sit down, or that getting another little bite to eat might hit the spot, nature, as they say, is the one calling the hardest, knocking on the door, pounding at the gates, threatening to flood the fields, and all that.

You almost have to feel sorry for the dear girl. It must be the most dreadful of ordeals, and cruel turns of fate, to be surrounded by zillions of the sweetest, kindest fairies, who only want to bestow upon you the very best of things and kindest of intentions, and for you--or Linda, as the case may be--to miss it all, concentrating as she is on... other things as it were.

I mean, she barely even registers the flower necklace that the fairies have draped around her neck. It's quite the honor, you know. How many people have you met who've had wreaths bestowed upon them by the Fairy Queen herself? But honor or not, Linda's mind is not all there.

"I really need to go to the bathroom," she finally admits sheepishly when she finds a break in the ceremonies.

"To tinkle?" the Queen asks in mock harshness, but all of the gathered fairies twitter at the pun.

Sure, you and I know it's not very clever, but when you're the queen, folks tend to laugh at your jokes, especially when someone has just planted visions of the Red Queen and her infamous, 'off with their heads,' so recently into one's, um, er, head.

Anyway, it's not really a big deal. It is after all part of life, nature as they say, and that is the fairies' domain, so it should come as no surprise that a pair of fairies lead Linda to an appropriate locale behind a bush, and leaning against a tree, so that she might take care of business.

###

Of course, you know how that goes in these dreams. You can never really get any relief, so one minute everything's going along fine and dandy, and then...

“What the! Of all the!”

You will have to resolve the transition on your own, but take it as given, that one moment Linda is... um, relieving herself on a grassy knoll and the next moment, said knoll has more than a few rectangular arranged stones standing here and there, and no number of them laid on the ground like slate paving.

I will not leave you in suspense. They are tombstones, and more than one of their occupants it noticeably upset.

“We don't go pissing in your pool!” one says flustered as he rises out of the ground.

“I think you're getting your sayings wrong Frank,” and I believe we've already established that the ghosts names aren't accurate... so don't be looking for Sir William Frank in the encyclopedia or doing a bit of research trying to find out what the Duke of Ed is in charge of.

Also, like many of these totally unimportant persona's, we may sweep over the resultant bickering conversation that immediately commences.

Suffice to say, they are put out by the indignity of it all.

###

Luckily, Luigi, the tree Linda was leaning against, likes a bit of water here and there--being a tree and all--so he quickly shoos the ghosts off.

“Get out of here,” he yells, only he says it with more of a Brooklyn accent, as in, “Geet outta here,” as he waives his copper colored branches about and swats the disgruntled ghosts out of sight and out of mind.

###

Linda is, how shall we say this? Linda is still adjusting her garments and so it falls on Luigi, the tree, to continue the conversation. “They’re going to be pissed you know.”

Clever turn of phrase, is it not?

“Um, yes, I guess,” Linda agrees, but to what, one can never be totally sure. I mean let’s face it, fairies are one thing, but talking trees, and then ones that wrap its branches around you in what can only be taken to be... well, perhaps too familiar of a way, as they lead you down the path. It can be a bit off putting.

Even more so, when the tree in question has the bronzed body of a Greek god. And with features like that darling, you just know he works out.

“You’re bronze,” Linda says in amazement perhaps concentrating on the wrong aspect of the tree’s physique.

“Copper,” Luigi agrees. “Prunus tibetium,” and seeing as how perfectly unlikely it seems that Linda knows her Latin adds, “I get a lot of sun,” and what with the tanning oil, and what not...

OK. It’s a bad joke, but clearly it goes right over Linda’s head as well.

“You tan?”

“No, but that’s what most folks think when they see me. It’s my natural bark coloration...” but it doesn’t really matter. I mean, this isn’t an educational garden tour... or whatever.

###

I suppose I will be unable to escape describing Luigi in more detail. Call a tree a hunk, and you’re just begging to have to spend a few words on him, but where to start?

He is vain--as are most men--and experience has shown that he simply won’t cooperate until he has been given his moment... in the sun.

(Please excuse me. I couldn’t help myself.)

###

Luigi is one of those copper colored birch trees that you've likely never seen. But still, there it is. His bark is nearly iridescent, and he's probably just lucky we didn't put any dwarves in this dweomer or it's a certainty that before it was through someone--meaning some dwarf--would strip his hide for the mineral content. Anyhow, that's what typically catches the tourists' eyes, and from there it's... well, it's the fact that he walks and talks. I suppose you could go into how his trunk branches out at shoulder level, and what, between the limbs, the dangling moss that looks like a beard, and the knot hole for a face... well, the fact is he has a certain amount of personality and he just sort of seems to spring to life... but really, isn't that just a roundabout way of saying he walks and talks. What more do you want out of a tree anyhow?

###

I suppose if you are looking for those initial echoes, those reflecting waves from so long ago, it is indeed possible that at some point Linda sat down beneath Luigi as she ate a snack and the memory has somehow become imprinted upon her, but that is really neither here nor there.

I mean, I've had countless picnics in the woods, and I can assure you, I've never had a tree try to seduce me... in my dreams or elsewhere.

It simply isn't done.

Fritz

Oh. Now you're just asking for it. I can't hold back.
Morgana never hit on by a tree?
I wonder why?

I mean, you just know how frisky those trees are (deciduous or otherwise). It kind of makes you wonder what that Linda's got that Morgana doesn't?

Maybe there's something more to it than Linda simply missing a meeting? I mean, you know what type of flakes most women are. How long would The Coven last, if it lost a member every time one of them they skipped a meeting...

###

But I'm just being obtuse and ungentlemanly.

Morgana is a beauty. I'm sure, Linda could not hold a candle to her, and the only reason Luigi is hitting on Linda, is because that is his nature. It is perhaps an indication of how hard up, poor Luigi is, to have fallen to the level of hitting on girl such as Linda. He must be having a bad... decade. You know, to the point where he'd go for anyone--or anything for that matter--to break his run of bad luck.

I'm sure there's a woody joke in there somewhere just waiting to be discovered, but I can't seem to put my finger on it, so it can't be too important.

Luigi is love struck, or maybe he's simply a helpful type guy... or, er, tree. Whatever the case, Luigi takes his time about leading Linda over to one of those old time water wells like Jack and Jill used to use... only, you know, like better, because this one works.

###

"It's a Wishing Well," Luigi advises.

Regardless of the fact that we just said it did (in fact work), Linda replies immediately, "Those things never work."

The girl is simply not with the program, and you can see how this response just sort of flows through Luigi as if he's never heard

anything more ridiculous in all his life... or maybe that's just the breeze picking up.

"This is a dream, remember?" Luigi prods. "Just drop a coin in, wish for whatever, and it will come true."

It seems like a good idea, and so Linda searches her pockets, but alas, the last coin she had she spent freeing the fairies.

"It was worth it," a nearby fairy remarks reading Linda's thoughts.

"Yes. It was," Linda agrees, "but now I don't have a coin."

#

"Oh, I've got one," Fritz remarks, as the amiable little gnome reenters the scene, walks toward the love birds, and alternates between flipping a gold coin playfully about in his hands and twirling it across the top of his fingers like some sort of professional gambler and/or conman. You know, as if to establish that the little tyke has some sort of uncanny--dare I say magical--affinity for money, wealth, golden coins, and such.

"What are you doing here?" Linda replies more than a little annoyed--which would mean like really annoyed. This is why girls are so hard to understand you know. They'll say stuff like I'm more than just a little annoyed, and you're supposed to figure out what that means on the fly. Does it mean she's annoyed a lot? Just at an average sort of middling annoyance? Or what?

#

I suppose like most things women say, it doesn't really matter.

What is important, is that just knowing Fritz is around causes Luigi to lose some of his life and vigor. His hands are no longer around Linda's waist, he's no longer acting like a love-sick rascal, and if truth be told, he's looking a lot like a normal

tree... if a bronze-ish birch tree with a mossy beard for a face (and a Brooklyn accent) can ever be considered normal.

###

Anyway, some while ago Linda had asked a question, and it is only fair to answer her, "I'm helping," Fritz replies, um, er... helpfully.

"Are you?"

"Sure. If you could wish for anything, what would you wish for?" Fritz asks as he gamely tosses the golden coin--the only coin that matters in all this--down the well.

"That's easy," Linda replies, "that things had been like they were before you showed up."

"Just now? With Luigi?"

Kinky girl.

"Yes."

Well then. That's how it shall be.

###

"I guess a Wishing Well won't do you any good without a coin," Luigi agrees, "but if you ever get one, you could use it to leave."

"Leave? Why would I want to do that?" Linda asks as she caresses the tips of Luigi's leaves, and rubs her hands along his thick--meaty--branches, the ones that Luigi has wrapped protectively (and suggestively) around her body.

"You might want to someday," Luigi replies. And when you get right down to it, he's the more practical of the two, legs rooted firmly on the ground and that sort of thing.

But Linda's mind is not on such things, and so she demurs, ever so innocently, "I don't think that is very likely."

Morgana

This is ridiculous. There is no romance between Linda and Luigi required in this enchantment! We must nip this in the bud at once! Trim our losses! Cut and run...

OK. It doesn't make a lot of sense to me either.

The point is, Fritz is a careless, stupid idiot. I think that sums up my point of view. And there is no way, I'm going to allow this ill conceived arboretum/human romance to go any further.

Forgive me. I feel that I am forced to fight fire with fire, or in this particular case, shear stupidity with utter nonsense.

#

"Hey guys! Look at me!" Mortimer calls out gaily from up in the clouds. What do you know, he's taking his hot air balloon ride after all.

Basically I'm guessing you have the foresight to see that this is going to end badly. I don't mean to be an anti-vegetation plant hating nazi here folks, but if Gra'gl had wanted trees to fly, he would have given them wings. Likewise, if the dark lord wanted trees and girls to consort shamelessly together--or basically if he had wanted Linda to live happily ever after--he wouldn't have given me the power to make it so... or not so... or whatever.

The point is, I have the power.

And Luigi and Linda will not be getting it on!

#

"Oh, look at the time," Luigi says with sudden alarm as he notices the hour on a passing sundial. "I've got to get trimmed. Some of these branches are getting out of hand."

It really seems like a lame excuse. I mean, it's like a guy calling off a date because he claims he needs to get his haircut, and you just know it's a lie... especially when the short, spindly, troll of a man in question is going bald. It's insulting. That's what it is.

Clearly the worm is not even trying to come up with a real excuse, not even trying to save face, for himself or for you.

“No. No. It’s not like that,” Luigi argues, but Linda doesn’t believe him. You can see it right there, playing itself out on her face.

“Look. I really have to go,” Luigi insists as he indicates Fritz, who is even now grabbing a ladder out of the tool shed. “Once he’s done cleaning out the Wishing Well...” and gathering up any loose change...

“He takes the money from the Wishing Well?” Linda asks as she once again interrupts the narrative flow.

“Of course,” Luigi agrees not really understanding the problem, but then, you know how men are. “Anyhow, once the worm boy--gnome, I think we’re calling him--once he’s done with that, he’s going to cone over here and trim my branches. It’s on the work log,” spell outline, something like that.

“Oh...” Linda says, finally getting the picture. One way or another, her romance with Luigi is just not going to happen. It’s time to move on.

###

“Hey,” Luigi says suddenly brightening up. “I could set you up with my cousin.”

“I don’t think I need to be set up,” Linda declines as she tightens her arms about herself and gets all close minded.

“It’s not like that,” Luigi assures her. “He’s a moss man. He can show you around the forest.”

“Really, I don’t think...”

And it is words like that, which will seal your fate Missy. So we need not relate the rest of the conversation. Rest assured that Luigi will escort Linda to the garden gate, and then once she has walked past a moss covered obelisk--shaped eerily like a tombstone--she will enter the forest.

It is, after all, such a nice day, such a nice pleasant day for a stroll in the woods.

#

“Such a nice girl. Such a nice day,” Luigi says echoing the sentiment as he strolls back to his corner of the garden.

“Why did you send her into the forest?” one of the fairies asks him crossly when they are alone.

“Why not?” Luigi replies defensively. “It’s a wonderful day, and the forest is a wonderful place to take a stroll.”

“She always betrays us in the forest,” another fairies points out angrily.

“Oh, I had forgotten,” Luigi admits, not really paying attention, and thus making it pretty darn likely that he will make the exact same mistake the next time though.

#

“Yeah.”

“Un-huh.”

“Get with the program lover boy,” the fairies continue crossly.

“Next time send her somewhere else.”

“And make sure she takes her raincoat,” a last fairy points out, as she notices Linda’s coat lying on the bench beside Luigi, just where she left it.

“Yeah. OK. I’ll send it over to Mort,” Luigi agrees distractedly, but let’s face it, he isn’t really listening.

On a sunny day such as today, it is so easy to let the mind wander, to go where it will, and traipses along in the breeze, first going first this way and then that. It’s just the way dreams go, but then you already know that. I mean, no matter how hard you try to get things right, something always--just always--goes amiss.

#

A haircut!
Sha-right!

Fritz # #

It would appear that Morgana is a wee bit preoccupied at the moment.

I don't know if we've mentioned this or not, but me and her were an item at one time... and well, let's just say here in the astral--the dream world as it were--tense shifts can be chaotic and unpredictable.

The point is, Morgana saw something in me once, which probably means she will again.

Just like I saw the potential in Linda.

So what if she's a beautician? And just because I'm a man, that doesn't mean I'm not vain. I pride myself on my appearance. And as to that haircut, look what happens when you don't keep an appointment with one of the sisterhood. So you see, I could never be late for an outing with Linda.

But really, that is neither here nor there, and it is beginning to sound a lot like an apology, so where were we?

Ah, yes.

#

Linda is walking through the woods, and the woods are simply glorious. Don't get me wrong, the Fairy Queen knows her stuff, and the gardens are all you could hope for, but give me the wilds, the untamed expanses of an open forest.

Me. I'm a bit of a moss man myself.

#

Moss is everywhere. The place is full of it. So delightful, so thick and luxurious, it covers the forest floor like a carpet.

Linda has been walking along for some time now and is far along, deep inside the woodsy grotto. By now she's walked by the gate stiles that look like tombstones without giving them a thought; she's gazed at the patterns on the pathway, and they've hardly dented her thoughts; and she's watched as the birds in the trees have once again morphed into fairies.

#

"It's a wonderful day Linda," they seem to say.

"Yes, quiet," Linda agrees and then she whistles along with them and tries to sing a song.

Clearly this unhappy state of affairs cannot last.

But it seems that it must. It seems that it will.

#

The path that Linda walks upon is set into the side of a tall hill, though calling it a hill gives the wrong impression. It is more of a foothill, or a small mountain really. It rises hundreds of feet into the air before disappearing from view on the one side, and falls hundreds more on the other before coming to the bottom and ending in a small river, or babbling brook. The path is wide enough, and the slope is gradual enough, but still, one would not wish to fall.

"And why not?" comes the voice from what Linda had thought was only an old moss covered tree trunk.

"Pardon me?" and you can go into one of those, Who said that?, Wizard of Oz routines if you like, but in the end they are so tiresome. It is the Moss Man, and he has come to play, so we will forgo the greetings...

#

“I’m Moss Man.”

“I see that you are... Oh, where are my manners, I’m Linda,” and so on and so forth. Really, it matters not. What is important is that the Moss Man knows how to party... and to show a girl a good time.

#

As such, it is not long before they are running across the hillside, making Moss Angels, building Moss Snowman, having a playful Moss Snowball fight, and so on. I think the theme should be most painfully obvious. I’m sure they build a Moss Fort, tunnel through the Moss, etc.

etc.

etc.

etc.

#

Perhaps that does not give you the flavor you are looking for. When they built the Emerald City, they were not inspired by a gem, but by a green forest in full bloom in the midst of spring as reflected in the eyes of a sweet young girl.

Can you see the moss that covers everything? How it dangles low? Strings off of the branches? And cavorts quite freely and openly with the endless expanse of the forest floor below?

Can you see the ground covered by this billowing mass of life? As if the moss was some sort of exotic, specially made floor-to-floor shag carpet that the denizens of the forest had just had newly installed?

Watch as all the creatures of the wood join in and play with Linda. See there, a squirrel tumbling at her side, and the fairies darting to and fro singing their happy tune, forgetting all the while

that they are supposed to be dressed as birds in an effort to disguise their true form.

And then, of course, there is the Moss Man, the Green Man himself. Dare I say, he looks handsome and tall, with a whimsical smile--sort of what I looked like in my younger years--and here he is carrying Linda across a threshold of roots, to lay her down in a romantic bed of moss...

#

Linda is quite beautiful you know: flowers woven into her hair, such a delightful smile, and those eyes. The beauty of all creation is reflected in them.

This is how a dream is supposed to go.

Not all vile and horrid like that monster Morgana would have you believe.

Morgana # #

**MONSTER MORGANA!
VILE AND HORRID!**

#

“Did you hear something?” Fritz--I mean the Moss Man--says nonchalantly.

“What?” Linda asks totally unconcerned, blissfully unaware, seemingly safe in the woody embrace of the brambly creature.

“Probably nothing,” the Moss Man agrees and then after a moment more adds, “Hey! I’ve got a great idea. Why don’t we go sledding down the slope? If you still had it, we, or at least you, could use your raincoat as a sled. You could get some real speed going, and I could catch you in my arms at the bottom.”

Kind of makes you sick to your stomach just to think about it, doesn't it? But no matter, my pretties. I'll get you, and you're little lover boy too.

He-he-he.

Cackle. Cackle. Cackle.

And then the witch's theme music starts to play.

###

If you can't remember the melody, that's alright, it starts with the crack of thunder.

If you are anything like me, you may wish to imagine a bolt of lightning obliterates the Moss Man in a sudden--yet incredibly painful and long lived--explosion.

Linda is, once again, all alone.

Her friends are gone, being nothing more than figments of her imagination in the first place, and the world around her turns violent, dark, and foreboding.

This would be when the thunder roars and the lighting flashes once again, and then the rain starts...

###

But then, why start with mere rain? We are in hail country after all, and Linda is so into patterns. Focus your eyes on this then my dear. I am sure this experience will give you one of those precious life experience memories that you're always going on about.

###

It truly is amazing what goes through the dim girl's head at times.

Hail! Hail, I say! Hail is dancing around the girl, bouncing off of the moss, gathering in little pools, turning the world around

her white with ice, and Linda is searching for a camera... and failing that, standing there, looking with awe and wonder trying to etch the scene deep into the recesses of her soul, so that she will never forget what the moment looks like, feels like.

And Linda without so much as a jacket on. She's sure to catch her death of a cold, or death of something.

###

A moment more and Linda suddenly awakes to the danger. Shivering she looks around. It takes her but a moment to realize that she is lost. She could consult her map, but even she knows it is useless, and here, in the middle of this thought, is when it starts to rain.

Great big drops of icy cold water. Think small chunks of hail that didn't quite make it to earth before melting. Delectably cold. Can't you just feel the drops sucking the warmth out of Linda's frigid little body drop by icy drop.

Yes. She will catch her death of cold for sure...

###

Which I suppose is a cue for the ghosts. It almost seems like overkill, but, what the heck. The slutty Linda has no one else to blame. She and has brought this turn of event onto herself.

Not that you would know, but your typical ghost is a bit shy and standoffish, so rather than just running up to Linda and saying, "Booh!" (a course of action that is highly ineffectual at best) the lot of them--and there are a whole lot of them--stand some distance away shaking the trees (as if they were a howling wind) and throw pinecones, sticks, and bits of dirt at the poor girl.

I'd mention the tornado scene from the Wizard of Oz, but I think we've already borrowed from that tale enough already.

###

Let's see...

Well, you'll have to figure out the ghost story reference on your own. Perhaps, Pumpkin Head, or that headless rider from The Legend of Sleepy Hollow, or whoever, or whatever...

No matter. The thought is there, and as such, the chase is on. Perhaps it starts innocently enough as a mad dash to get out of the rain. But which way? Downhill to the river? Or uphill towards... What?

#

Don't ask me why, but Linda chooses uphill. And as is the nature of these things--mucking about and playing in the rain--she is soon soaked to the bone, ice cold, shivering, and totally exhausted. It is the last that sticks in her mind the most as she stumbles ever onward, and ever upward, as the wind continues to whip up a storm around her.

There is no doubt about it, the afternoon, which only moments ago had seemed so pleasant, has turned into a nightmare.

All Linda wants is a place to rest and warm up... maybe a hot tub, that would be nice.

But where will she find one of those out here in the middle of nowhere?

Fritz # #

Ta-da!

It is I, Fritz--stand in for Prince Charming--to the rescue!

#

Is that mean ole' nasty hag of a witch being mean to you again my dear, sweet, precious Linda? A name, I might add, which is a joy to say and which brings comfort to my heart. I

almost like saying it--my dear sweet Linda--as much as I enjoy listening to Morgana scream with hysterics--in the background, just beyond the ridge there--whenever I do.

My dear, sweet, sweet Linda...

Crackle-Crackle-Boom.

I guess it sounds sort of like thunder, but trust me. It's the witch. She's cute when she's angry, don't you think?

Anyhow, the point is if Linda wants a hot tub. Who am I to argue?

#

Yes. Who exactly indeed?

#

As you may have noted, Linda is not exactly taken with me at the moment. She's sort of disgusted with me actually, and to say she distrusts me is... well, that's the understatement of the year. So when you get right down to it, I will be unable to play this role. I'll need to find a stand in... you know, someone to take my place... someone, or something that she trusts.

But who?

And then there it is. Smack dab in the middle of Linda's head, right where it should be. There was that camel she saw earlier in the day, or was it yesterday.

No matter.

And don't go asking me why she's thinking of that stupid beast, perhaps because it seems so out of place... or then again, perhaps it is because this is exactly where she met it before.

#

Camel's are, of course, fairly self contained creatures, and so when Linda stumbles upon the creature sitting in a hot tub... Is that really a hot tub? Out here in the forest? Right there by the side of the path?

As Linda fumbles along and tries to get her bearings, I should note that there is no respite from the weather. The wind continues to rage around her, the rain falls ever harder, and you can bet the thunder and lightning has only increased its ferocity to match the rage of the delightfully temperamental Morgana.

Cackle! Cackle! Boom! Boom! And all that.

###

“What? How? What are you doing here?” Linda finally gets out, but you know how camel's are. He's got his head buried in one of those Suduko puzzles. He cannot be bothered. He has other things on his mind than the problems of a wayward girl, like: what number goes into that next square? Always such a difficult question, and there are so many factors to take into account.

###

“Excuse me,” Linda says louder, not one to be ignored.

“Hmmm,” the camel says without looking up. And really, to say camel does not do the creature justice. I don't know if you've ever seen one of the horrid beasts up close, but they smell something awful, and their fur. It looks like a raggedy old woolen blanket that's falling apart. All in all the creature appears more like some sort of Rastafarian Middle Easterner with a big nose than anything else, which--when you get right down to it--is exactly what he is.

###

“Excuse me,” Linda says again. “Can you help me. I seem to be lost... in a dream I think... and I was wondering if...”

“Hmmm,” the camel says again as he finally looks up. It is clear he hasn’t been paying the slightest bit of attention to Linda. “What do you think? A three or a two for this next square?” he asks as he indicates the puzzle book. “Dreadfully complicated. I’ve been working on the same one for... I don’t know how long.” No thanks to you, he might add, but politeness wins out and he does not.

Instead the camel-man-thing looks at Linda quizzically-- which is perhaps a suitable expression for one who spends their time engrossed in puzzle books--as he asks, “Do you have any idea how long it has been?”

“Since what?” Linda replies more than a little annoyed. The fact is, she’s still cold, and as nice as a hot tub sounds, she’s starting to notice how fetid and disgusting the water actually is-- what with the fleas, sticks, and all the mud (if that’s what it’s called) floating about. “How long has it been since you’ve had a bath?” she asks reflexively without thinking.

###

“That’s good. That’s good. I like that,” the camel remarks in an agreeable if sarcastic tone, as he puts the Suduko book down and starts to bathe, which pretty much means splashing some of the soupy black water over his arms and neck. “Throw the question back at me. Very clever,” he continues as he taps his head as if to say, brains don’t you know, before he ducks under the water.

When he resurfaces, he shakes his mane like a dog, and slop goes flying everywhere. I can feel it getting into my teeth even at this distance, but the camel does not seem to notice... or care. “My name’s Yogesh in case you’ve forgotten,” he says after a bit as he grabs a clump of moss and blots his face, toweling off as it were.

“I’m Linda,” Linda replies--as if perhaps there was some possibility a person named Sue had dropped into the dream and so the clarification of who is talking was required, but it’s not.

“I know,” Yogesh replies, and once again, to what he is responding is not exactly clear. “I only told you my name again, because it is quite tiring to have you come around and introduce yourself endlessly.”

“What? I don’t know...” (what you are talking about), but Yogesh cuts her off mid sentence with a simple, “Exactly.”

#

After a brief period of time in which nothing much at all happens--Linda stares at Yogesh with some degree of perturbation, while Yogesh returns the favor by ignoring the girl and picking up his puzzle book--the camel finally breaks the silence by showing her the Suduko puzzle that he is working on and asks yet again, “First square. What do you think?”

#

Have you ever tried to do a Suduko in your dreams, or a crossword problem, or even one of those algebra word problems in math class? Oh, it can get messy--what with the numbers and letters dancing around the page, your pencil never working, and then there’s the whole problem of suddenly remembering you’re not wearing any pants, but you’ve got to hand it to Yogesh. He’s solved this last issue quite handily by plunking himself down in a murky hot tub for the duration. And pants or not, through the dark dank swill infested water, not a thing can be seen and so no one will ever know.

#

It has been a while--yet more time has passed--and if for no other reason than to break the silence Yogesh slaps at a particularly bothersome flea. "Horrid little things," he observes.

And it would be at this point, that Linda notices: a) how much she herself itches; b) how annoying the little pests are; and, c) how many of the little buggers are--all over the place, swarming, crawling, biting, and stinging.

#

Without thinking, Linda slaps one of the little suckers that has landed on her shoulder. It's a good solid slap too. If you've ever been to mosquito country, then you know what I'm talking about. Getting that direct hit can be very satisfying, and then of course, you have to look at the results. Pull back your hand and see the poor, deformed, mangled body of the fairy you've just killed... or mosquito... or whatever. They're pretty much the same thing.

#

"Now you've done it... again," Yogesh observes, but Linda isn't really listening. She's watching as all of the flowers, petals, and buds begin to fall off of the trees in the frenzied wind. I am sure that you are one step ahead of me and realize that as they fall, they turn into the stiff, dead, lifeless bodies of countless fairies. Millions of them. Zillions of them.

"Oh, no," Linda says, in what is perhaps an understatement.

"Oh, no is right," Yogesh agrees as he echoes the sentiment, but his heart really isn't in it. "You know, I don't know why I need to be here. Look, just figure out what goes in this next square. I soon as we," meaning you, "solve this little puzzle, I can get out of here. Don't even ask me what I did to piss them off."

"Who?"

But the camel only waves her off as he goes back to his puzzle. “It’s either a one or a two, but which...”

#

“Wow! You’ve got some twisted imagination,” Fritz remarks as he walks down the path towards the pair--in his true form no less.

Don’t ask me why his voice carries so easily, what with the raging wind and all...

Well, fair enough. Maybe you’re curious and you’d like to ask me why, in which case I’ll tell you...

#

Because! That’s why!

#

As you can see, I’m all about clarity and helping the next generation of spell slingers along.

Now, where was I?

#

Fritz appears on the scene, and although it’s rainy, windy, and Morgana is throwing a hissy-fit just over the hill with a Crackle-Boom here and a Crackle-Boom there, his voice is easy to hear, and when you get right down to it, he looks pretty darn snazzy--that’s snazzy: as in extremely un-gnomelike.

#

“Fritz! Thank Gra’gl,” Linda says as she rushes to the comfort of his arms.

And time and time again Morgana has tried to break in here with some nonsense about how Linda's affection for me weakens the spell.

It is true. I will admit that Linda is not so crazy about the gnome, which I've been playing, but that is not who I am at the moment. I am Fritz, her friend, her confidant, her coven brother, and a member of her family in all my regal, magical splendor.

Think of it this way. How often do Americans come together in foreign lands to talk inanely about the concerns of home? Well then. Think of how much more the relief in seeing a friendly face when it is clear you are lost, adrift in a sea of confusion, and confronting a storm of mind numbing intensity?

No matter that the face in question might--in reality--be the cause of your grief. Linda doesn't need to know this, and so, with any luck, she shall not know this.

Now then, where were we?

###

"There, there," Fritz says reassuringly. Isn't that what all the ruggedly handsome, murderously good looking guys say?

"How did I... Oh, it doesn't matter. I'm safe now."

"Will you two take is someplace else," Yogesh says as he interrupts the moment. "I'm working on something here."

"What's he doing here?" Fritz asks innocently.

"Working on a Suduko," Linda responds.

"It's either a one or a two," Yogesh informs them. "I've gotten that far."

"I thought is was a two or a three," Linda replies, but as those Suduko puzzles are hyper boring, we will just fade the rest of this conversation out and not elaborate on how that pretty much means the answer is two.

###

When they--the pair, the two of them, the love birds--have walked down the path a ways, arm in arm, like old friends, sister and brother, etc., Fritz turns to Linda and holds out his hand for the dead fairy. "I can take care of that for you."

"What?" and really, if Linda had a catch phrase at this moment, it would probably be, What?

How delightful. How precious. How totally unaware. In the end, how altogether helpful.

"The fairy," Fritz--the dashing gent in a tuxedo--says as he indicates the horribly damaged, barely breathing creature in the girl's hand. "Just give it to me, and I'll take care of the rest."

"Make it better?" Linda asks as she hands the creature over.

"Sure." Something like that. I suppose better is a matter of opinion and perspective, but if the poor, dimwitted creature, wants to call it better, who am I to darken her world.

Who indeed?

###

"We've got a few more bits of logistics to take care of," Fritz says as he walks Linda down the path. She's soaking wet and all, but for some reason no longer particularly cold. Perhaps walking arm in arm with Fritz warms her heart.

"You'll notice the patterns in the mud as we walk down the path," Fritz continues and Linda does as she is told, but for the life of her she can't see the point.

"What am I supposed to see?"

"Well, the reflection of the sky for one," and just then for effect, Morgana does one of her patented Crackle-Boom numbers. The lightning reflects nicely off of the line of puddles in a fractal, bizarrely complicated, mind twisting, try to find the hidden meaning in that type way.

###

And then we need the sisters to come barreling along the path on their horses. They're not really there, of course, just echoes of echoes of echoes, but sometimes that is all that is required.

They go rushing by, and Linda goes spinning around as she twirls out of the way, almost exactly like a toy top getting an extra kick of juice.

"What are they doing here? Why did they go?" and then putting it all together. "Are they mad at me? What did I do?"

"I may have let it slip that you and me slept together." Dreamt together, slept together, who am I to quibble at words and their meanings.

"You what?"

See it's with that what again.

"We never slept together," Linda points out, but look, she can't remember that she's in a dream half the time, you can't really trust her recollection of events.

Besides, "I don't really think it makes any difference whether we had an affair or not..."

"We didn't have an affair?" but methinks the girl protests too much.

Either way, Fritz merely shrugs. "Huh? Well, then. I suppose it must seem all the more unfair to you that Morgana is upset over some little indiscretion that you never actually made, doesn't it?"

###

And with that, the duo will pass by a little grouping of mushrooms by the side of the trail. A pixie circle, or a stone hedge done in shrooms, Fungus Hedge, I guess the little fairy twerps would call it if any of them were around.

I note it only as a marker, a place of switching. In the end, it is nothing important.

What is important, is that at this particular point in time, Morgana, or the thunderclouds overhead will let rip with a mighty

roar, and I'll cede control of the dweomer to Morgana, and Linda will find herself... somewhere else, yet again.

In the end though, it really would be a pity if Morgan believed Linda. If the girl was telling the truth, all of this might be for naught...

Morgana

Fritz likes to muddy the waters. Just look to the hot tub that Yogesh has been soaking in if you need any confirmation of this.

If he wants to pretend that he's had an affair with Linda, that's his business. Of far more concern to The Coven is Linda's attempted defection. Really, as if anyone could possibly be jealous of another woman's relationship with Fritz. The man is positively a troll, after all.

No.

The man is a gnome.

Let us not confuse things.

###

Nor shall we jump ahead.

While it is true that the twisting threads of the dweomer are numerous and strong, we still must tie them off one by one. And in this regard, it can be of benefit to keep one's distance and take one's time, so the exact nature of the knot can never be seen by the person whose hands--heart and soul--one is binding.

###

Regulated as I have been to the role of thunder and lightning in the distance, let us watch on high and afar as Fritz escorts Linda to the next stop.

It is a café overlooking the ruins of the Heinmillerstien Abbey. It is here that Linda will drink way too much tea. Besides

the obvious tie in that we have already established, caffeine (and whatever else might be in the... witches' brew) has a way of interfering with the normal sleep patterns of any who imbibe of it. No doubt Linda's rest will be troubled and disturbed from here on out. If we are lucky, her dreams may become circular and repetitive, perhaps they will even spin around and around forever and ever in ever tighter interlacing circles. But then, perhaps this is just a mindless bit of anti-caffeinated beverage propaganda on my part included for no discernable purpose.

No matter.

The point is, we will not delve too closely into the conversation that the lovebirds are having. In the end, I am sure that it is a private affair. All the same, even at this distance we can see that Fritz is not all that--handsome, good looking, or even mildly alluring. Trust me when I say that his initial charm wears off rather quickly, and quite soon one realizes how short, fat, bald, and basically gnome like the little worm of a man--and I use the last term loosely--really is.

#

Some threads, however, deserve a bit more of an explanation than I appear to be giving them.

The simple fact is, as Fritz and Linda have their conversation, as Linda rests, regroups, and those all important nutrients from the seeping brew reach her brain, Linda begins to make some sort of sense of things, and to see things as they truly are. It is for this reason, if no other, that she comes to see the gnome of man--that calls himself Fritz--as he really is.

I mean, truly, who would want to have an affair with the likes of him in the first place?

#

“Fine. Whatever,” Fritz--the hobbled little gnome--says in all his newfound glory. “Don’t believe me. I’m only trying to help.”

But Linda--rightfully suspicious--makes no commentary.

“So that’s it?” Fritz asks as he stands up. “I come all of this way and that’s it?”

“I didn’t ask you to come,” Linda points out, and I suppose that settles it.

Affair or not, it would appear to be over, so Fritz pays for the meal--with the infamous gold coin don’t you know--and in a huff--like gnomes are want to do--he departs.

#

It is still raining, so it can be difficult to determine whether Linda is crying or not, but one thing is sure, the world she finds herself in is amazingly unmagical.

The fairies are dead--fallen from the trees--and all that remains are the birds darting here and there among the deli patrons for scraps of food.

Considering the inclement weather, the fact that she is done eating--and wouldn’t a restroom be handy right about now--and that she is all alone, there is no reason for Linda to stay at the cafe any further. But as she rises a tall gallant tree that has been standing over her, watching over her as it were, advises, “You should take the coin.”

What?” Linda asks as she looks around, and employs her patented catch phrase yet again.

“Take the coin you can use it to buy anything... free the fairies, or use it at the wishing well...” the tree suggests.

It is good advise, and so Linda grabs it.

#

It would likely be a good idea for Linda to question this tree, Burle as he is called. I'm sure Burle could give her a pointer or two, perhaps even tell her where she has gone wrong in the past few iterations of the enchantment and all that. Perhaps he could even help her find a way out.

So as nice as it would be to sit around and chat, before Linda can get her head together and sort anything out or make some sort of game plan for the future, it is only appropriate that we send her running on a fools errand immediately--and without delay.

###

As such, immediately--as in without delay, prelude or warning--Mortimer appears suddenly--but I guess we're just being redundant now--in the sky. Unfortunately for him what started as a nice day has turned--quite a while ago actually--into a nasty sort of storm, but relative timing in the dream world isn't really all that important. The fact is, Linda's mind has only just now returned to Mort, and so it is only just now that his fate will be resolved.

Watch as his hot air balloon is thrown this way and that by the wind. Imagine if you like that it is much as if someone were tossing a wooden spoon back and forth in their hands trying to decide what to do with it, and then with a great big Crack-a Boom! watch as a bolt of lightning shreds the contraption and breaks it into a million pieces. Then watch in delight--or whatever emotion you choose for yourself--as the foolish tree goes crashing to the ground, in a pile of broken boards, conveniently stacked in chaotic disarray by the old sawmill.

"Mort!" Linda cries and off she goes, as if she can possible help the poor guy now.

###

When Linda arrives, it is clear there is nothing she can do. The rain has mellowed some, and a tour guide is standing on a

giant beam of wood that protrudes from an enormous pile of poorly stacked lumber as she lectures a small group of... well, ghosts.

They would have to be--or extremely old people. I mean, who else would take in the sights on a day such as this, but a group of ancient men and women with absolutely nothing better to do?

The answer of course is Linda, that's who.

So without a word--you may imagine, if you'd like, that this is a moment of silence of sorts for Mort--Linda quietly and inconspicuously joins the tour.

#

This pile of wood is, of course, the location of the old sawmill that burned down and took the Abbey with it, and as such it is the logical starting place of a tour of the Heinmillerstien Estate.

I am sure you know how these tours go. It is first this room, and then that, and basically what you are looking at the entire time is a pile of rubble or a crumbling wall that towers majestically hundreds of feet into the air. The running commentary that the tour guides tend to patter on about, however, has absolutely nothing to do with the sights before your eyes and is basically meaningless blather.

"This is the stable," they'll say in regards to one pile of rocks. "In its prime, the Abbey had..." lots of horses.

"It was a city unto itself..." they will continue, as if the size of the remaining stone walls wasn't a clue that the place was huge-like really, really, really huge,

At the kitchen they might continue with the ever popular sample menu for a typical party, say Queen Morgana's wedding reception to that two-timing worm (I think by now you to whom I allude), and the guide might say, "the staff prepared 400 fat geese, 300 plump chickens," and so on and so forth, as if a mere shopping

list can give you the slightest idea of the sheer wonder and magnificence of it all.

Trust me, it doesn't. A list of 400 this and 300 that only really gives a sense of how incredibly, mind boggling, stupendously large the bill was. The kind of bill that was sure to crush the love out of any relationship, no matter how passionately it might have been felt previously and forthwith.

#

But where was I?

That is the past, water under the bridge.

It is this next room that we are interested in. The tour guide has nothing interesting to say about it, "The rectory," I think she says, not that I know what that means.

The room itself is not overly interesting. Like most everything at the Abbey, it has no roof, but even so, the fifty foot tall walls of worn stone break the wind and shield Linda from most of the weather.

Here, she can see flowers growing on the ledges, in the vacant stone windows, on the tops of the walls, and in every imaginable crack. If she had not killed the fairies, you can bet they would be here, playing, or perhaps cursing her.

Aye, Wat you looking at? I can almost hear them say as they toss down stones and pebbles upon her, but sadly they are not here to do so.

Perhaps it is just as well that the fairies are gone (rather than becoming actively hostile as was originally planned).

#

And, Yes. The spell has gone awry. For instance, the map--once central to Linda's enslavement--is now patently worthless. I don't even know why Linda bothers to take it out and look it over at this juncture. I mean, she's not even sure the map is for the

same town that she's in, but no matter. She can make no sense of it. All the same, she puts it away--safe and sound--in her back pocket

She is stalling. Can you tell?

We have talked of the walls, and the flowers, and the absence of fairies... but what of the ghosts?

Even they leave Linda alone in this room. In fact, ever since she has hit the ruins, the ghosts have backed off. Linda can see them in the tour groups, in the corner of rooms, running and playing... Have I mentioned the perpetual game of cricket that is going on even in the rain?

But this is just color. As a group, as if they have a mind of one, the ghosts leave her be. Linda is so close, and they all must know what is to come next, for she is at The Pattern.

###

You may have heard of the thing. It appears here and there in stories and books, and witch's grimoires. It usually appears as a labyrinth or a drawing on the ground.

Forgive me if I sound pedantic, but all enchantments--all realities--have within them the keys to their escape, and ours--following as it must the form of the rest--can be no different.

Our key--or so it would appear to Linda--is a group of stepping stones on the ground. Some large and some small, all worn smooth over time and flush with the grass that grows between them. And what with the towering walls, the howling wind, the darkened sky, and the thunder and lightning dancing about, you could not hope for a more dramatic setting for the climax and pivotal scene in our little tale.

###

Oddly, much is made about the difficulties in walking The Pattern, retracing the charm, or undoing the spell, but really

nothing could be easier. You simply start to walk, and from there you merely cede control of all future decisions to your immediate surroundings. In short, you give your will over to the spell, or in this case, the rocks in the ground.

#

The first step is the always hardest, for it is in this moment that Linda must make the choice and set her will in motion, but she takes the step easily enough.

I am proud.

She is of the sisterhood after all, and walking The Pattern--any pattern--is such a basic skill. What kind of witch would she be if she could not follow a recipe, or do The Pattern justice?

A poor one.

The answer my sweets is a poor one.

An utter failure, and a wretched, hopeless bungler not worthy of being a Sister of The Coven in the first place.

#

Sort of like the type of person who might be caught having an affair with their best friend's husband, and while we are on that subject, it is only fair to point out that at some point a person's humanity ceases to be, and then... well, then it is best if you were never born at all.

#

But there is always hope of escape, to leave it all behind. What does it matter if Mort is a pile of logs? The fairies are dead? Or if--believe it or not--the ghosts remain conspicuously devoid of peace and atonement?

I am sure Linda does not care. She is a witch after all, and if your parents have taught you well, the word should send shivers

down your spine, and cause you reach for your soul and hold onto to it with all your might.

Unfortunately--for her--Linda is not such a witch.

Such a shame.

So close, yet so far.

#

Nonetheless, for effect, to add drama to the moment one could cause the ghosts to swirl about in growing distress and anger, as they watch helplessly on as Linda seeks to escape, but there is no point.

I have faith in the spell, and having been down this road before, so do they.

As it is, it is not long before Linda has walked the pattern, seen what she must do, and chosen her course. In the blink of an eye, the dweomer has changed and things have been made right. Thus is the nature of The Pattern.

Even now, Mortimer awaits in the town square. His limbs will take some time to heal, but he will recover.

And the fairies, someone will buy them. Someone always does. Perhaps some girl on vacation...

But what of the ghosts? They are not appeased, but then, what can it possibly matter? After all, are they not dead?

#

It would be a simple thing to leave.

Well, it should be a simple thing to leave, but Linda does not take the opportunity, or perhaps--more than likely--the opportunity is not there for her to take.

#

However, at this moment Linda still has hope in her heart, for she believes that she knows the way out.

Silly girl.

Poor silly delusional girl.

It is worthy of note that it is with escape in mind and not some sense of kindness or charity that Linda returns to the site of the sawmill. It is here--standing in the rain--that she lets a misguided vision of what had once been fill her mind and take root in the ruins surrounding her.

#

See there, the corner stones and the wall that has fallen over. Watch as the stones right themselves and rise to the roof. In an instant the jumbled pile of wood assembles itself, as thatch from the wind forms itself into a roof. And then, right where the tour guide said it would be, a door appears, and not to be outdone, the rotted remains of a waterwheel comes to life taking on its true ethereal form.

#

This is the point of inflection. This is the nexus.

#

Or, once again, so it would seem.

#

Linda kneels down next to the river and takes off the lei of flowers, which the fairies had given her, or if you like, she places the lone flower that she has been idling spinning in her hands down on the grass.

It need not be much. The offering is symbolic, and without further ado the ghosts are at peace.

Is it just me, or has--somehow--the day has turned just a little brighter.

Linda smiles at a family having a picnic on the grassy lawn--a park they call it. It may not be the best of weather, but when in merry ole' England, one might just have to readjust their view of what a good day is.

After all, we have dallied in this land for long enough. Our vacation is nearly over, our time almost at an end. From here there is only one final stop before we leave this place and return from whence we came.

###

Linda arrived by Stone Hedge, or a least a stone hedge, so that is how she must leave. She knows this from walking the pattern.

There is no need to say goodbye, no need to drag it out. All will be well. All she need do is leave, but there is no hedge around.

She could go off to the original one, but that would never do. One cannot escape by returning to the start. Even Linda knows that. Rather she must find a new portal. Make one if she must...

###

And it is a good idea. Here in the ruins, Linda is surrounded by rocks. Surely she will be able to find some of the proper size. It will then only be the small matter of rolling them together.

But even in the dream world rocks are heavy and Linda cannot make them budge. A normal girl might give up, resign themselves to their fate, but Linda has walked the pattern, she knows the way, it is simply a matter of doing that which needs to

be done, of doing that which she has not been done before, and so Linda falls into her mind and sees the solution.

It is so obvious, so readily apparent.

Why had she not thought of it before?

Or, perhaps she should be thinking instead, why do I think of it only just now?

#

No matter.

Moving the rocks is too difficult. The thing to do is to reveal the existing stones where they lay and to dig them out.

Yes! That is the solution.

Finally Linda understands. Walking The Pattern and finding her way through the labyrinth, that has been but a minor thing, a minor occurrence, only a small singular thread almost unseen and unnoticeable to all but to the most observant. It is not important. It cannot be important. It must be a red herring and a false door.

The bottom line, although it is intended to look as such, the stone pattern Linda walked cannot possibly control this world. No. It must be the Stone Hedges instead!

#

Don't ask me from where, but Linda has found the tools she needs to excavate the stone boulders. She suddenly has picks, shovels, and all of the like.

And as she digs a great hole surprisingly fast, her mind works backwards. At all the points of transmutation there was a hedge, the mushroom hedge, the flower hedge, and even the crystal hedge in the shop. That must be the master one, she figures correctly. That must be the matrix in which the spell is contained!

#

And then it hits her, as these things so often do. If that was-- if that IS--the crystal, The Pattern, the holding nexus and framework of the dweomer... then the flagstones she walked on and which showed her the way?

“Nothing but rocks,” Fritz assures from the lip of the pit--the grave as it were--that she has dug for herself. “Nothing but rocks.”

“But, what?” yet at this point even Linda can see that her catchphrase is not appropriate for this situation, and so she amends it, “But, why?”

#

I think there is some code of honor, some oath that the villains must take before they are admitted to the Club of Evil. Or, is that the Axis of Evil? By whatever the name, it seems that the bad guys are inevitably required to explain their malicious actions to their victims before they leave said quarry to their fate.

It is with this in mind that Morgana appears over the edge in all her regal beauty next to Fritz. The wind picks up her hair and flicks it about, while lighting flashes behind her and shows off her slender, near perfect body in graceful silhouette.

Morgana pats her little helper, Fritz the gnome, on the head. The little freak only reaches to her waist now, but no matter what Fritz looks like, he could only appear as a monster next to the ravishing beauty that is Morgana. But I fear that after saying Morgana is a delight to behold, a natural beauty, a ravishing temptress so many times--I fear that I repeat myself, so clearly it must be time to be moving on.

#

“You slept with Fritz,” Morgana explains simply to Linda in answer to her query as she tosses a handful of soil on top of the poor frightened girl, just as a grief stricken mourner might do

graveside. I told you the hole looked sort of like a grave. Did I not?

“But I never! I didn’t sleep with Fritz!” Linda desperately insists.

And you know what? I believe her, yet I think Fritz, the weasel like gnome of a worm says it best--you know, that he puts the whole situation into the proper perceptive--when he crumbles a handful of dirt onto the terrified girl and informs her quite simply, “Well then, perhaps you should have.”

#

And I think you know the tale from there.

With a flash of thunder and a stroke of lighting, the duo is gone. All that remains is the lovely Linda who slowly falls to her knees in a pit of despair of her own making as she is quickly overcome by a drowsy, suffocating slumber.

In moments, all that will remain is the black mist and the wind that sort of looks like a coven of ghostly riders swirling about endlessly. Well, that and the gathering clouds from an approaching storm that may or may not have actually been here for some time, but then, no need to go on.

Like I said, I think you know the rest of the story from here, and well, after a while it just gets repetitious, so this is where we shall leave Linda, forever, and ever, and ever...

Fritz # #

About the Authors:

Morgana Feldstone and Fritz Heinmillerstien are both automatic writers who have chosen as their field of focus the astral plane. Previously married, they found the union insufferable for

“artistic reasons,” and the partnership soon collapsed. Unfortunately, neither one of them has been able to convince a judge (Nefarious or otherwise) to grant them sole custody of their creations, so they continue to write together as a team--if that’s what you want to call it.

And as for Linda--dear sweet Linda--she simply shouldn’t have shackled up with Fritz so soon after the divorce... or perhaps she should have, I suppose it depends on whose version of the story you wish to believe.

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