

A Mother's Milk

The house sits halfway up a hill, set a long way back from the road. Gorse bushes flush with small yellow flowers gather along the roadside, and the ice wind rakes relentlessly across the cragged and mottled hills, relentless. It's rocky earth out here, hard and cold. I can hear the violent ocean beyond. I am alone in the house with my daughter and we are long way from the nearest neighbours. Outside, through the window I see the last of the dusk burning in the sky as shadows seep into the trees and the rocks and the hilly, folded fields, submerging the landscape like a slow, black sea.

How she spent so many nights on her own out here, and at her age, I'll never know. I pull the curtain loose from its sash and the heavy fabric falls across the pane.

I turn the heavy key in the iron lock and it sends a jolt through my bones as the bolt sinks home with a clang. Shutting the spirits out, that was one of Mam's sayings. She was always muttering about the spirits, the faeries, her skirts swirling around her, hair black and curling, come loose from her braid, around her face.

Memories of her keep bobbing to the surface, like bubbles, at the moment. Things I thought I'd forgotten, snatches of her voice, stories she'd tell. Images that fade and shimmer the more tightly I try to hold onto them. It's amazing what the brain retains from childhood.

And what it can forget.

I suppose that's natural, though, at a time like this. But I can feel it in the house, that familiar pull. A hungry tide of echoes sucking me down into the deep.

I tuck the key into the pocket of my cardigan, and it weighs down the woollen garment, bangs against my leg as I walk. It is a big old iron key, and iron keeps the fairies away, that's what she believed. It's repellent to them, and they can't touch it nor cross it. I

shake my head. Nonsense. The fire hisses and crackles, and I pull my cardigan tight around me. So small, this space in which she lived. Barely ten steps in all between the hearth, the sofa, and the kitchen sink.

At the rickety kitchen table Shelley is playing with a doll she has made from sticks and wool and a scrap of red fabric she's found on the property. I've made her toast for supper and her little fingers are fat and jammy as she takes a bite and places the piece of toast carefully back on her plate.

'Darlin', what are you playing?' I try to keep my voice steady but I hear the tremor in it. She turns her little full moon of a face down to the doll, and holds it up to her ear as if it is whispering to her.

'Me and Mister Lam are playing *away with Mammy*,' she says.

'Because you're away with me, here, in this little cottage. That what you mean?'

Shelley doesn't reply but goes back to moving her doll around on the tabletop in front of her.

'Mammy, will you tell me again about Grandma Leah?'

'What do you want to know, darlin?'

'How come you went to live away from her and I never got to meet her before now?'

I feel the familiar ache tugging deep in my belly, and I turn back to the tea chest spewing blankets, balls of wool, crochet hooks, and cushion filling. The room is filled with the smell of old, dusty things unearthed from long-settled places. The heat from the fire warms my back. I take a coloured blanket in my hands and it is rough and familiar against my skin. Her things. All this *stuff*. I don't want to keep any of it for myself, but it's hard to let it all go, too. I have so little of her. I place the blanket in the op shop pile on the couch and plunge the cushion filling into the yawning, black mouth of a garbage bag.

'Because she wasn't very well, love. And she couldn't take care of a child properly.'

‘What was wrong with her? Did she break her leg?’

‘No sweetheart, she was unwell in her head. It happens to grownups sometimes, when you’ve had a very hard life and you don’t have other people to help you and love you.’

I don’t tell Shelley about the bruises they found on me, the burn marks. Or about how even when they said she was healthy again and medicated, she refused to see me. I don’t remember much of those early years with her before I was taken away, and when I do dig for it I find a black, faceless thing. At the edge of those memories something is lurking, something I’m so afraid of it turns me to ice. Sometimes it’s best not to dig.

When I got the call from the lawyer, I said no. I couldn’t imagine going back after all this time. I didn’t want the house, or the things. God knows why she’d left it all to me. Guilt maybe? But human hearts work in strange ways. When your mother reaches for you, even if it’s from the grave, it’s a stronger daughter than I that turns her back. So, I came.

Shelley picks up her doll and fusses with the red cloth she’s tied around the stick body.

‘Come on love, eat your toast. You can play after.’

‘Were you little like me when you went to live with Nanna Melanie?’

‘Yes, I was.’

‘But you don’t remember living here with Grandma Leah and Mister Lam?’

‘No, sweet, I was too little. And besides, Mister Lam is *your* friend, isn’t he? He never lived here when I was small.’

Shelley is still for a minute, her blue eyes focussed behind me, her toast congealing in greasy swirls of butter and jam on the plate in front of her, the doll is motionless in her hands. The firelight jumps and flickers across her face, making her eyes twinkle.

‘Shell? Eat your toast. Come on now.’

She doesn't move. She can hear me, I know. Her face is still but her eyes are animated, as if she's listening to somebody talking, or watching television. I turn to see what she's looking at but there's nothing there. My eye is drawn to the darkened corner of the room, behind the rocking chair, where somehow the shadows are thicker.

I feel the tightness in my chest. I try to take a deep breath. Normally I'm good at managing my anxiety these days, but I've been jumpy since we arrived here. The wind is picking up outside and there's a clattering as the branches of the stunted Wych elm scrape against the tiled roof. I take a breath, pull out a small tin from deep in the chest. It rattles, and when I open it, it is filled with buttons of various colours and sizes. I take another breath. Then Shelley speaks and the tin flies out of my hands, buttons scatter-rolling around on the ground, the tin falling with a clatter. She shrieks with laughter.

'Oh goodness. Shell, you scared me to death.' I bend down and start picking up the buttons one by one. Each button makes a clang as it lands back in the tin and I try not to flinch at each sound. 'Sorry sweetheart, what did you say?' Shelley slides from her chair and bends down to help me pick up the buttons.

'I *said*, Mister Lam told me he's always been here. He remembers you, Mammy.'

Something chills me and I shake it away. Another memory tugging at the edges.

'Ok sweetheart, if you say.' It's silly, I know it's silly. It's always spooked me, when she talks to them, her 'friends.' I know they say it's normal, but I can't get used to it. Mister Lam is a new character, and something about this one feels strange, unfriendly. I look over my shoulder, into the darkened corner, light and shadows jumping and shifting as the firelight flickers.

For a minute I think I see something. A child huddled against the wall. I move closer and the shadows seem to thin out, lose their body. There's nothing there. Shelley is looking at me.

‘Do you see him, too, Mammy?’ A chill runs over my scalp and, involuntarily, I finger the iron key in my pocket.

‘That’s enough,’ I snap. ‘If you’re not going to eat any more, you’re off to bed. And no more talk of Mister Lam. Go on now, and off to bed.’ Shelley tenses and her face falls, as it always does when I raise my voice.

‘Sorry, Mammy,’ she says in a small voice. She picks up her stick doll and trails from the room. I hear the creak of the bedroom door. I am shaking, and I don’t know where this sudden fury has come from.

I grab at the brush and shovel, sweeping up the buttons and then I take everything left from the tea chest and throw it into the garbage bag, tying it tight, my eyes on the spot behind the rocking chair.

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In my mind there’s a dividing line, and all those early years are washed away. Being back here, though, it’s strange the things that are returning to me. I tuck fresh sheets around the edges of Leah’s bed, where I will sleep tonight. With the whip of the cotton shaken out over the mattress there is the snatch of a song, hummed through pressed lips as she used to do. I am cold and I pull a woollen jumper from her chest of drawers, the smell of lavender clogging my nostrils. Suddenly I am choking, held too tightly against her, so tight I can’t breathe. I am struggling but too small, too weak to break free.

Tears slide down my cheeks and I press the jumper back into the drawer and close it tight.

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The next morning I wake, make a mug of hot tea and take it into Leah's bedroom. I have there a cardboard box into which I begin to empty the small bookshelf. The books smell musty and some of them have handwritten price stickers on their covers that you find in second hand bookstores. I come to the bottom shelf that holds a dozen or so notebooks. I take one out and open it, flick through the pages jammed full of her loopy cursive. I'm tempted to read it, but I'm also scared of what I'll find, of what ramblings might leak from the pages and into me.

I know that the faeries and demons she believed in were symptoms of her illness. I know this. And yet I'm finding it isn't so easy to push away the feeling I have of being watched, of being... accompanied by something else out here. I am worried that reading her fantasies will undo all of the work I've done over the years. I sit with the books on my lap and take a long sip of the cooling tea. I hear the shrill chatter of robins outside, and the waves crashing the distance.

What is it I've come here for, though, if not to understand her a little better? It would have been just as easy to pay someone to pack up the house, as Melanie reminded me in her gentle way before we left.

I take a breath and open the journal. This one is almost ten years old. I would have been celebrating my twenty-first birthday. I scan the pages. Some of the writing doesn't make sense, it's just words repeated again and again. Others are lists of chores, with ticks and crosses next to them. Some are summaries of a day's doings. One reads:

*Planted out the parsnips, soil looking good. Colcannon for
dinner again.*

The entries are dated, but irregular.

I pick up another notebook, this one is yellowed. I see the date. 1987, I would have been two years old. I flick through, feeling nausea stir. Some of the pages, again, are scrambled, nonsensical. I come to a section of neat rows that sounds as if it's been copied from somewhere:

Children can be stolen into Fairyland to pay a TEIND to the Devil, to reinforce the fairy stock or for love of their beauty.

...The Growling is a particularly noxious type of malicious GOBLIN, adept at SHAPE-SHIFTING like the PICKTREE BRAG and the HEDLEY KOW, but more dangerous and vicious. This kind of goblin feasts on grief, pain and misery, which it needs to survive, particularly that of women and children who have the most to fear from the Growling.

I flick through some more pages, some with drawings of animals, birds, and landscapes. I pick up the next notebook in the stack. It is 1990 now, the year before I was taken. This is harder to read.

I can't trust her. Not anymore. She said to me today, 'Mammy, would you know if I wasn't me?' (I know what this means!) and told me the Little Man said he can take her to visit a wonderful place full of songs and

magic. She seemed outwardly concerned about me, that I would be lonely, and reassured me that I would have the Little Man for company and that he could, 'put on a mask to look just like me, Mammy.'

It is clear to me that they have gotten to her and she is in danger of being changed for a faerie. They will come for her again, as they did when she was a baby. I think she wants to go with him, she is an unloving child and would certainly betray me, leave me.

I MUST TAKE PRECAUTIONS.

- *Boiling eggshells*
- *Starvation*
- *Iron on the skin*
- *Place the child on the flames*

I feel an ache in my chest and turn the page. I flick through more paranoid ramblings.

He wants Pauline. He appeared to me yesterday, in Pauline's shape, I'm sure of it. I burned it with heated iron and it went wailing from the house down to the creek. She is back today, herself. I must stay vigilant and keep taking these violent but necessary precautions. She is a devil of a child, but she is MY child and I must keep her from harm.

I close the book and place it back on the shelves with the others. For the first time in a long time I take my hand and slide it beneath my shirt, feeling along the side of my torso for the puckered flesh. There are smaller scars on my arms. And one deep in my hair, along my scalp, where hair and flesh were once burned away.

When Shelley was born I used to touch the scars often, a reminder of the kind of mother I didn't want to become. I don't remember what happened to me as a child, but I think the body holds the memory. It sees nearness as danger. Affection is... difficult for me. It drives people away, the way I can't get close.

I look around at the room. There are open cardboard boxes half-full of belongings. My suitcase is open, clothes and toiletries neatly packed. There is so much to do, so much more than I expected.

I touch my hand to the mug but the tea is cold. I take it into the kitchen and tip it into the sink.

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Early in the evening, as the wind roars outside I fix us dinner: a stew of turnips, potato, carrot and fennel from the vegetable garden. We eat in silence, and our spoons scrape against the china bowls like chalkboard screeching.

'Mammy, are you cross with me?' Shelley asks.

'No, Sweetheart. Why would you think that?'

'You haven't played any games with me today. And you look sad.'

'I'm ok, Love. I'm just sad about Grandma Leah, that's all.'

We finish our dinner and I dump the dishes in the sink. There is a draught blowing in from some gap I can't find. I open one of the drawers. Tea towels. I pull them out, and begin

to sort through them. Some look new and could go to second hand. But I'm tired and even the tea towels feel like too much right now.

I fill the old grey bathtub for Shelley and squirt shampoo into it for bubbles. The brass taps on the tub, the damp smell of the bathroom. They are so familiar. I sit with my hand in the water while it fills, let the rush of the water block out the black thoughts. The warm water flows against my fingers. I turn the taps and the rushing noise stops.

'Shell,' I call.

In the bath, the water sloshes against the sides of the iron tub as she flips and turns like a pale water beast, her skin slick. I am kneeling by the tub, pouring shampoo into my hand.

'Mammy, can we go swimming in the creek tomorrow?'

'You must be kidding, child. It's cold as a witch's teat out there!'

She giggles. 'A witch's teat.'

'Do you know what Grandma Leah used to say about that creek? She used to say that's where the little folk play. And if you don't want to be eaten up by them—they do have a preference for little girls—then you best stay up on the hill. What do you think about that?'

She looks at me, waiting for me to tell her whether I'm joking or serious. 'I thought you couldn't remember Grandma Leah.'

I say nothing, fill the plastic cup with water and pour it gently over her head. The soap rushes down her scalp and over her freckled shoulders.

'Mammy, why is Grandma Leah sad?'

'What d'you mean, love? I'm sure she's not sad. She's up in Heaven, maybe. With the clouds and the angels.'

‘She’s not, Mammy. She’s by the fireside, I saw her.’

‘Sweetheart, no. Grandma Leah is gone.’

‘No. She’s here. I saw her in the rocking chair, crying. And Mister Lam was there on her lap, comforting her.’

The tightness returns to my chest and I think I might cry.

‘Shelley, now. Don’t you be lying.’ I try for a firm tone, but I hear the tremor in my own voice.

‘I’m not lying.’ She is indignant.

‘Sweetheart. I know it’s confusing and might feel scary, but it’s ok. Grandma Leah will always be with us in our memories and in our hearts. That’s what happens when people get old and pass away.’

‘What happens to their bodies?’

‘Well, people much smarter than me might have all sorts of clever ideas about that. But I think they go back into the earth, and become part of everything. The trees, the flowers, the water. So they never really go away.’

She holds up her hand and turns it about as if seeing it for the first time.

‘Ok.’ Then she grins at me. ‘Mammy, time my breath!’

She takes a huge gulp of air and plunges beneath the water. I start to count. It is so quiet, all I can hear is the wind outside, the drip of the leaky tap. Shelley’s face wavers, blurred beneath the bathwater. Her eyes are squeezed shut and her golden hair floats around her face like seaweed. I get to eighteen and she bursts up with a rush and gulps the air.

‘Eighteen!’ I say.

‘That’s three more than last time.’

‘You’re getting good.’

‘Mister Lam says that sometimes Mammies hold kids underwater until they drown. Is that true?’

‘That’s awful. No, of course not. And I think you need to stop listening to Mister Lam. He doesn’t seem like a nice friend.’

Shelley is quiet for a minute. Then she says, ‘He’s not.’

‘What do you mean?’

Her eyes flick to the doorway and then back to me. ‘I don’t think he likes you, Mammy. He keeps making faces at you. And he says mean things sometimes. I don’t think he likes Mammies.’ She looks back to the doorway. The lights flicker.

A shiver goes down my spine. ‘What kind of mean things?’ She waits for a moment, stock-still.

‘He doesn’t want to me to tell you.’

‘Shell, this is creeping me out. I want you to stop, okay.’

She is looking over my shoulder and I turn, expecting to see a small, shadowed man in the doorway, but there’s nothing.

‘He likes it when you’re frightened. It makes him laugh and dance around.’ She giggles.

I stand up. ‘Shelley, stop.’

She starts to giggle. ‘He’s funny when he dances!’

There’s a tight feeling in my chest, and I just want her to stop talking.

‘Stop. Now.’

But she doesn’t.

‘Look at me. Shelley!’ I bend down and take her by shoulders, shaking. Her wet skin is slippery with soap so I grip her tighter, shaking, shaking. The red fury courses through me.

Why won’t she just behave?

I realise I am crying and so is she, and suddenly I feel a pinch on the back of my arm, a hard one that stings. I release Shelley and spin around, my knees soaked from the water that has spilled onto the floor. Shelley is whimpering in the bathtub.

And then there is a smell. The mineral smell of cold, fresh water rushing over rocks. I am dizzy. I turn away and slump against the side of the tub.

We sit there for a while, Shelley's sniffles gradually dying away until she is silent. I can't face her wounded expression so I sit with my back against the tub, water soaking through my trousers until I begin to shiver with cold. I feel as if I have had the life drained out of me. I don't know how long we've been sitting here.

'Oh, Love, I'm so sorry.' I wipe my eyes and take a deep breath. But when I turn to look at her, the bathtub is empty.

Shelley is gone.

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I jam the key into the door, my hands shaking, turn it with a clang and leave it in the lock with the door flung wide. Outside the moon is high and it bathes the landscape in cool light. The wind blows raw and wild, howling through the trees and rushing against my face. I fumble with the torch as I run and a yellow beam appears in front of me, dropping everything else into blackness.

'Shelley!' I yell, and my voice is snatched up by the wind. She wasn't anywhere in the house, so she must be out here. Come out the back door maybe? A window?

I stop, whirl about with the torchlight as scragged trees and tangled shrubs leap to life in its glare. I hear the snap of twigs breaking under my feet. I call out again. How long did I sit by the bath for? Did I pass out? I can't remember her getting out of the tub, can't properly

remember what happened after I lost my temper. Something inside me flips at the memory of shaking her, shaking her hard, my hands like claws on her tiny shoulders as her face crumpled with distress. I push the image aside. I follow the narrow, rocky path down the hill, stumbling on loose stones and sticks, not knowing if this is the right way but calling out, my voice high and full of shivers.

The smell hits me before I realise where I am, and then I hear it: the trickle of the creek. It is a cold smell of rust and decaying leaves, organic and metallic at once. It unpicks something inside me, some protective seam, and I begin to shake with terror. There is something out here, I realise. I am not imagining it and I am not alone.

I point the light ahead of me, and I see a figure in the tall grass at the creek's edge beyond the willow tree. What if he has her? What if he has Shelley? I cram my fear into a box inside me and push through the curtain of willow fronds. The figure doesn't move. The smell of the creek is overwhelming down here, rich with rot and soil. I take another step forward.

The figure is still, facing the creek. It's almost close enough for me to touch. It stands just taller than the grass, which is up to my waist and in the glare of the torch light I see it has hair which is matted with mud and leaves and I realise now it is quivering. I extend my arm but cannot bring myself to touch it.

I take one more step, my hand plays an inch away from the thing's shoulder and then in a gust the wind tangles my hair and for a minute I cannot see past it and then I stumble and fall, and as I crash into the small figure it is so strong and solid it is like falling against stone and I leap back but only for a second because I see now. I see it is Shelley.

It's my little girl, and she is naked and covered with mud and standing stock still staring down at the creek which eddies and bubbles at her feet.

‘Shelley!’ I kneel down and clutch her to me, but she is cold and stiff. I pull back and shine the light on her. ‘Are you hurt?’

At first it is like she doesn’t see or hear me. Her face is impassive, utterly blank. Her eyes are closed off, unseeing although they are open and unblinking. Then a shadow passes over her face and it is like she has awoken from sleep. She turns her head and focuses her blue eyes on me.

‘Hello, Mammie.’

‘Shelley. What are you doin’ out here? What’s happened?’

‘I don’t remember,’ she says pleasantly, her voice flat and faint. She seems unphased by her bedraggled state. My stomach is swirling with nerves. I tear off my cardigan and wrap it around her shoulders.

‘Come on, sweetheart, let’s get you back inside. You’re freezing, oh God.’

She turns, her movements stiff with cold.

‘Mammy, will you carry me?’ There is something strange about the way she is speaking, robotic and stripped of emotion. I hoist her up onto my hip, and she is heavy. She grips my neck with her strong little arms.

‘Don’t cry, Mammy.’ She puts her face, reeking of creek water, against mine and she begins to lick at my cheeks, lapping slowly at the tears that are streaming over my face. A shiver of repulsion jolts through me. I fight it, holding her close, and stagger back up the hill towards the house.

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I drain the bath and re-fill it with warm water as Shelley sits by the fire, utterly still and staring at the wall in front of her. When I help her in, she has stopped shivering but is still cold to the touch with the faraway look in her eyes.

The water clouds with green-brown mud and I collect clean water from the tap and sluice it over her face, picking small leaves from her hair. She is quiet but doesn't seem to be sulking, and she is watching me. I wish she would stop watching me, I need a minute to breathe.

'Do you want to hold your breath, love? I can count for you if you like?'

She looks at me intently, I feel like she is boring into my thoughts. Then she says, 'Okay.' She slides beneath the water.

It takes me a moment before I remember to start counting.

'One, two, three, four...' I try to slow my breathing, let the counting calm me. The water is a sickening colour and I can barely see her features through it.

'Twelve, thirteen, fourteen...'

The water feels so cold already, too cold. I breathe.

'Seventeen, eighteen, nineteen...'

I move my hand through the water over her face to clear the silt, and pull away with a shock. She has her eyes wide open, and she is looking at me through the water.

'Twenty-five, twenty-six....' My voice is shaking. The water shifts, distorting her features and for a second her face disappears.

'Thirty-one...'

Instead, an angry, crimson face with round, white eyeballs stares back at me. I gasp, then it is gone. I stop counting. Seconds pass, I don't know how many.

Eventually she pushes herself out of the filthy water, sitting up calmly.

I pull the plug and the bath drains slowly. She stands and I wrap her in a thin towel. She is watching me still. The drain lets out a loud sucking noise. As the murky water bleeds away I see there is still mud beneath her toenails.

I tuck her into bed, but she is quiet and rigid and her skin feels so cold. The lamplight burns softly, and I pull the patchwork quilt up to her chin. I sit beside her.

‘Sweetheart, I’m so sorry about what happened before. When I grabbed you in the bathtub. I shouldn’t have done that. I don’t want to hurt you.’

She looks at me, her expression detached.

‘Is that why you ran away down to the creek? Because you were scared, or cross at me?’

She says nothing.

‘It’s ok if you don’t want to talk right now, Shell.’ I brush her golden hair away from her face. She blinks. I kiss her on her head, her skin cool and soft under my lips, and I flick the lamp off. I am at the doorway when she speaks.

‘Mammy, do you remember yet?’

‘Remember what, sweetheart?’ I turn at the doorway where a rectangle of light from the living room stretches along the floor, over Shelley in her bed, and up the wall. She turns her head slowly so that she is looking at me.

‘Would you know if I wasn’t me?’

I freeze.

She whispers in a singsong voice that chills me, ‘Knock, knock, let me in, let me in, I’m hungry, Mummy.’ A grin spreads across her face. My hands are shaking as I back from the room and pull the door shut.

When I creep finally into my own room I close the door and, after trying not to, slide the latch across.

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It's deep in the night and pitch dark when I wake with panic in my chest and the smell of woodsmoke in my nostrils. I fumble for the lamp and the room materialises in the dim, piss-yellow glow. I check my phone, it's just after three. I sniff the air and I'm certain now I smell smoke. I jump from the bed, pulling on my cardigan. Shelley. I fumble with the latch at her door but when I finally fling it open, her room is dark and still. The bed is empty.

My heart thumps. I run down the hall and when I reach the doorway to the living room I see the soft, orange firelight is dancing merrily, making grotesque shadows on the dimpled stone walls. What I see doesn't make sense at first.

At the hearth, Shelley is crouching over something, busy with her hands, her back to me. She is whispering, rapidly, words I can't make out. I hear a tearing sound and she throws something into the fire. The light flares and crackles menacingly. Across from her, on the other side of the hearth, the empty rocking chair is moving urgently back and forth as though there is someone in it, fretfully rocking. I let out a gasp.

The chair stops still and Shelley's head snaps up, she stops what she is doing and turns her head slowly to face me. Her form is silhouetted against the fire behind her and I step closer to see her properly.

'Shell? What're you doing?'

Spread on the ground in front of her are Leah's notebooks lying open and dismembered, the pages torn from their spines. Whisps of paper scrawled with loops of Leah's cursive litter the hearth.

The rage comes in a surge, flooding everything else. I clench my hands into fists to stop from touching her.

‘For God’s sake!’ I grab for the books and Shelley lashes out like a frightened cat. I pull back my arm, the sting of broken flesh hot on my skin. That is when I look, really look at her.

She clutches a journal to her chest, still crouching low on the ground. She hisses at me and pulls away. Oh God, her face.

I put my hands to my mouth but I can’t look away. Her skin glows red, she is baring her teeth like an animal and her eyes are open impossibly wide, two white orbs fixed on me. She starts to growl and a black tongue flicks over her lips.

‘You’re not my daughter. Who are you?’ My voice shakes.

I back away from her, from it. Slowly the snarl transforms into a hideous smile and the thing begins to laugh.

‘Where’s Shelley?’ I am screaming now.

The thing in the shape of my little girl cocks its head at an impossible angle, the red face looking out from behind Shelley’s matted golden hair.

Tears roll down my cheeks.

‘Pauline, my girl. Do you want to play?’ The voice is all wrong, creaky and threatening, mocking me. But there is something familiar about these words. ‘You remember me, now, don’t you? Knock, knock, let me in. Let me in, I’m hungry, Mummy.’

I am remembering now, properly. I know this creature.

‘No, you’re not her.’ My legs give way and I sink onto the couch.

‘No. I’m not.’

I cry out.

‘Would you like her back, Pauline?’

‘Yes. Yes, bring her back, please.’

He scuttles along the floor towards me and leaps onto the couch.

‘We can make a deal, if you like. I’ll bring back your daughter, but you must stay here with me.’

My chest is tight. I feel for the iron key in my cardigan pocket and grip it tightly.

‘What do you want with me?’

‘Oh, Pauline. I’ve wanted you for a long time. So sweet and bruised inside.’ He nestles close to me and presses his face into my hair, sniffing and snorting in my ear. I am rigid with fear. The smell of creek mud is everywhere and I almost gag. I slowly pull the key from my pocket. ‘It’s all over you. Your grief, your pain. Delicious!’ He laughs, a crazed whinny.

I whip the key from my pocket and press it against his face and he roars. I hear the hissing of steam, and smell putrid flesh burning. He struggles but I hold it tight. He is howling. His eyes are bulging from his skull, and he tears at the hair that looks just like Shelley’s hair, with hands that look just like hers but formed into gnarled claws. He is sinking into the couch, weakening, and I am above him now, pressing down. He has his knees tucked into his belly and I don’t see it coming because I think I am winning. He kicks out both feet, with inhuman strength, and gets me right in the guts. And then I am flying through the air, flying backwards, and then everything goes black.

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I wake, my head throbbing, and shield my face against the sunlight. I find Shelley in the narrow single bed, sleeping. I touch her shoulder and she stirs, blinking up at me. She frowns.

‘I was having the strangest dream,’ she says, wriggling up, rubbing her eye with her little clenched fist. She is moving and talking like herself and I could almost cry I’m so relieved. I sit next to her and pull her close.

‘I’m so glad you’re awake. And I’m so sorry, Love. I’m so sorry.’ I swallow a sob.

She pulls away from me, her face questioning.

‘What’re you sorry for, Mammy?’

‘Here, let me look at your face.’ I push her hair back off her cheeks and examine her closely. The skin is clear, unmarked.

‘There’s nothing wrong with my face.’ She giggles.

‘Do you remember what happened last night?’

She shakes her head slowly.

‘Come on, pack your things, we’re leaving.’

‘Now?!’

‘Yes, right now.’

‘But Grandma Leah’s house isn’t finished.’

‘Come on, we’re going home.’

I push our bags into the boot and slam it shut. My skin is crawling with the urge to be gone from here. I search my handbag for the car keys but they aren’t there. I turn to Shelley, who is buckled into the back seat.

‘Just a minute, sit tight.’

I push through the heavy door and make for kitchen table. The smell of creek mud is strong and I press a hand to my nose and mouth. I hear the rocking chair’s creaking timber and the scrape of the rockers against the tiles.

I don’t look. I see the keys and snatch them up, hurrying to the door.

There is a sobbing noise, soft and wet, and though I try hard not to—I am at the door, almost out—I look up at the last minute towards the hearth and she is there, in the rocking chair, just as Shelley said. My mother, but wizened beyond recognition.

Deep wrinkles crag her face, and her hair is grey and thin, hanging lank and greasy from her scalp. Her clothes are rags, and her eyes are wide with terror and full of sorrow, for crouching on her lap is a terrible demon with a crimson face and a small body covered in black hair. And he has her head in his hands and with his long, black, tongue he is licking the tears from her face. She is whimpering, my mother, and she holds out a hand to me.

‘My girl, my baby. My little girl.’

I close my eyes, step from the house, pull the door shut and lock it tight.

A Mother's Milk: Motherhood, Trauma, and Monstrous Children in Folk Horror

In *A Mother's Milk* I use the supernatural tropes of Folk Horror to explore the dark psychological territory of maternal trauma. The figure of the changeling, which has appeared in several works of Folk Horror, is underpinned by the mother-child bond (which gives the mother a special ability to know her own child from an identical copy) as well as the maternal fear of the abducted child. As such, the changeling story is ripe with possibility for exploring themes of trauma and mental illness in relation to dysfunctional mother-child relationships.

Folk tales and Pagan religions in Folk Horror

Folk Horror is a genre deeply influenced by Neopaganism. Adam Scovell (2017, 18) identifies “skewed belief systems and morality” as one of four links in his influential theory of the Folk Horror Chain. For many Folk Horror narratives such skewing appears as Pagan beliefs and overlapping occult practices. For example, *The Wicker Man* (1973), a cornerstone of the “unholy trinity” of foundational Folk Horror films, centres on a rural farming community that practices ritual sacrifice to ensure a good harvest. Similarly, sacrifice is central to Ari Aster’s *Midsommar* (2019) and Shirley Jackson’s short story “The Lottery” (1948) among others. Witchcraft appears in films like *The Witchfinder General* (1968), *The Witch* (2015), *Hereditary* (2018) and classic silent film *Häxan* (1922). Magical curses are a key preoccupation and narrative device in the stories of M.R. James and the film *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* (1971). In Folk Horror, the supernatural and the magical elements that formed part of a pre-Christian, pre-Enlightenment worldview provide fertile narrative, thematic, and aesthetic soil in which to sow the seeds of horror stemming from the unknown. While these elements are often referred to in scholarship and criticism of the genre as

“occult,” “pagan,” or “supernatural,” I think it makes sense to see the genre as informed by Neopaganism.

Neopaganism is a flexible and diverse phenomenon, but can be summarised as traditions, practices, and beliefs “inspired by the practices of indigenous peoples and the paganisms of the ancient world revealed through archaeology, classics, myth and history” and “revived or recreated in the context of modern-day life in a continual creative process” (Pearson 2006, 828). The tradition of Folk Horror is culturally and historically tied to the emergence of Neopaganism, in that the three horror films widely identified as crucial to the genre’s foundations—*The Witchfinder General* (1968), *The Blood on Satan’s Claw* (1971), and *The Wicker Man* (1973)—all emerged during the counterculture revolution of the 1960s and 1970s which, as Scovell (2017, 13) notes, “produced interest in this period in a wide-ranging array of areas such as Folk music and Folklore, Astrology, nineteenth-century Transcendentalist ideals and Wicca Magic.” During this period a great deal of Neopagan knowledge and beliefs were developed and disseminated, chiefly through the movements of Wicca (a contemporary system of witchcraft developed by Gerald Gardner) and Druidry (a pagan religion with its roots in ancient Celtic practices).¹ Folk Horror, then, might be seen as part of a cultural milieu interested in and influenced by currents of Neopaganism. Part of the influence of Neopaganism still evident in contemporary Folk Horror texts is the interest in monstrous figures originating in ancient belief systems, of which Irish faerie lore is one.

The changeling

The changeling is a figure from Celtic folklore, specifically Irish faerie lore, that has been taken up in Folk Horror works. The changeling has its origins in the folklore of rural Ireland and refers to the likeness of a child that has been stolen by fairies and left in his or her place,

¹ For a more detailed explanation of Wicca and Druidry in the 1960s and 1970s, see Pearson 2006, 830-832.

presumably to prevent a mother from noticing the disappearance of her child and attempting to recover him or her (“Changeling” 2009). The real human child, usually an infant, was ostensibly stolen by fairies either to replenish fairy populations or to be given to the Devil as a “teind” (Briggs 1976, 62).² The changeling left in the child’s place was believed to be either an old, wizened fairy, a fairy child that would not thrive, or a stock made of wood and temporarily glamoured to give the appearance of life (Briggs 1976, 70). If a mother suspected her child of being a changeling she could attempt to send it back to fairyland through various methods of torture or exposure to the elements. She could also try boiling eggshells, which was thought to prompt the fairy child to reveal itself. Although the parent represented in changeling stories is occasionally a father, it is more often a mother.

Several recent texts have taken the changeling story as inspiration, including Irish films *The Daisy Chain* (2008), *The Hallow* (2015), and *The Hole in the Ground* (2019).³ These texts all use the figure of the “uncanny child” to represent children who are possibly changelings. Jessica Balanzategui (2018) describes the uncanny child as a departure from the possessed or evil children that appear in many horror films. The monstrosity of the uncanny child stems not from the horror of the inherently innocent child overtaken by some external evil (which reifies a clear boundary between good and evil), but from the possibility that a child may be something “at once familiar and alien, vulnerable and threatening, innocent and dangerously indecipherable” (Balanzategui 12). The uncanny child poses the unsettling possibility that children may not be what we think they are. In texts featuring an uncanny child, the qualities normally unquestionably associated with childhood—naivety, innocence, purity, simplicity—are brought under suspicion, with childhood instead “positioned as the

² Teind is an old Lowland word for “tithe”: a tribute paid to the Devil every seven years (Briggs, p. 390).

³ In these films, as in *A Mother’s Milk*, the Irish setting validates the faerie lore and makes the folklore more legible for the reader. Thus, regionality is a significant aspect of these stories. Although it is outside the scope of this chapter, the ties of specific folklore to place in a context of Neopaganism is a rich area of enquiry that can explore human connections to place through narrative.

site of traumatic, imperfectly recalled pasts that haunt the adult's present in obfuscated ways" (Balanzategui 2018, 12). Thus, such texts position the child as a "cultural other" that is "intimately connected to ideologies of adult identity" (Balanzategui 2018, 13). The changeling narrative, then, is one where the uncanny child may be used to probe cultural and identity anxieties around motherhood and mother-child relationships through the use of the uncanny child.

Abuse, trauma, and mental illness in *A Mother's Milk*

The changeling narrative presents opportunities to explore the taboo topics of maternal trauma stemming from child abuse. As Katherine Briggs (1976) points out, the method of torturing a suspected changeling in order to send it back to the fairies "has been responsible for a dreadful amount of child suffering" (71). While the faeries in changeling stories who are held over fire, struck with iron, or left out in the elements are immune to such violence and neglect, it is more difficult to confront the harm suffered by the real children who have been misidentified as changelings. In Hannah Kent's novel *The Good People*, Kent fictionally retells a real case of infanticide that occurred in Ireland in 1826 in which a child who was "unable to stand, walk or speak" was drowned by an old woman, Nance Roche, who claimed that she was trying to "put the fairy" out of the boy (Kent 2016, 383). In Kent's rich and complex retelling, the folk beliefs of the characters she represents are offered as plausible even as the afflictions of the child at the centre of the story present to a contemporary audience as having medical explanations. Kent's protagonist, the mother of the child, is depicted as confronting deep uncertainties about her ability to care for her child.

In my short story *A Mother's Milk*, my protagonist is Pauline, a woman who suffered abuse as a child at the hands of her mentally ill mother, Leah, whose illness made her paranoid that her daughter was a changeling. Pauline was permanently removed from Leah's

care by social workers. We meet Pauline as an adult who is haunted by a past and a mother she barely remembers. What's more, she is now a mother herself. When Leah passes away Pauline is called upon to return to the house she grew up in, an isolated cottage on the west coast of Ireland, to pack up Leah's belongings. Pauline brings her own young daughter, Shelley, with her.

Shelley is the uncanny child in *A Mother's Milk*. Shelley is befriended by a malignant shapeshifting faerie she calls Mister Lam, who claims to have known Pauline as a child. In fact, it emerges that Mister Lam attempted to kidnap Pauline, just as he is now attempting to kidnap Shelley. Shelley disappears suddenly when Pauline becomes violent with her, and when she reappears she is changed. Shelley is the agent that forces Pauline to remember her past, because it holds the key to getting the real Shelley back. At the same time, Shelley, in her uncanny state, represents the childhood Pauline herself endured and remembers only partially. Shelley, forced by Mister Lam into a position her mother once occupied—that of the targeted and vulnerable child—returns Pauline to the position of Leah and simultaneously forces her into an unknown future in which Pauline must carry the past with her. As such, the uncanny child here, as Balanzategui suggests, “expose[s] how the child's role as embodiment of futurity – and the concomitant alignment of growing up with teleological historical continuity – sits in tension with childhood as the ‘past’ of adulthood, and the child as adulthood's unknowable binary opposite” (15). To use Balanzategui's words again, Shelley “is simultaneously opposed to, the past of, and *part of*” Pauline (2018, 13, emphasis in original). The uncanny child in *A Mother's Milk* intervenes in the linear progression of development from childhood to adulthood, bringing into question the connections and distinctions between the three female characters as well as accepted notions of motherhood and childhood.

As the events of the story play out, Pauline struggles with fears: she fears that she will develop the same illness as her violent mother, that she may harm her beloved Shelley, and that she is repulsed by, or does not recognise, her child. These fears represent the spectre of the “bad mother,” a deviant and monstrous form of womanhood that haunts many women in their experience of mothering.⁴ In returning to the site of her trauma she is forced to confront her spectre and its origins and to remember what happened to her, a horror that proves too much to embrace. In this story—through the characters of Pauline and Leah—I have attempted to represent the taboo of the “bad mother,” as both a spectre that haunts motherhood as well as a complex reality. Leah appears as a literal spectre in the story’s final passage, and Pauline refuses her call, escaping the past that struggles to re-establish a hold on her.

There are parallels here between Folk horror and Gothic horror, where ghosts and other supernatural phenomena are often used to exteriorise internal trauma or mental illness, and also to blur the boundaries between interior (psychic) and exterior (physical) worlds. Ghosts often symbolise unrest in the past, “a story not closed down” (Wisker 2016, 209) and are unsettling and productive for this reason, embodying a problem from the past that must be solved. Sometimes, as in *The Hallow*, *The Hole in The Ground* and *A Mother’s Milk*, the supernatural elements emerge as the story’s reality, triumphing over rationalist explanations and facilitating the resolution of internal and external narrative conflicts. There is a sense in which these stories suggest that explorations into fantasy or the extranatural have the potential to facilitate healing. A pertinent example is the Australian film *Relic* (2020) in which a haunting leads to the resolution of tensions between the central characters—a daughter and her mother coping with the decline of their grandmother/mother into dementia.

⁴ For a discussion of the “bad mother” in cases of maternal violence see Naylor, 2018. Also see foundational feminist thinking on violence and the mother in Rich, 1986.

Here, the supernatural forces push the characters beyond the roles and scripts that are failing them, and into unknown territory where all is stripped away, allowing them to confront an underlying darkness and re-establish their mother-child bond. While it is also possible to argue that Folk and Gothic Horror depictions of trauma have the potential to reify problems by relegating them to the realm of fantasy and thus remystifying them, I argue that these stories in fact actively consider traumatic and psychological problems by using supernatural elements to create possibilities beyond the horizon of conventional or rational perspectives. Writing about women's ghost stories, Gina Wisker (2016, 209) points out that, rather than subordinating such tales to flights of fancy or fun, the supernatural can more productively be seen "as a way of expressing the insights of the imagination." The insight demonstrated in *A Mother's Milk* suggests the freedom available to Pauline in the difficult act of resisting the truism that "blood is thicker than water" and instead unshackling herself from an abusive family history.

Conclusion

In my fiction writing I am interested in using Folk Horror to explore complex and troubling feminine psychologies and experiences, as much as I am interested in creating the affective experience of the thrill. Thus, *A Mother's Milk* explores the uncanny experience of Pauline as she encounters a stranger who looks exactly like her child but certainly is not, and is forced to confront both the spectre of her abusive mother, and her own capacity for violence.

Ultimately this story presents a complex Folk Horror monstrosity that is difficult to pin down: it is never clear whether it is the mother or the child that is monstrous, or whether the two can even be separated. Folk Horror, with its neopagan influences, provides fertile ground for exploring contemporary psychologies and interests through reference to ancient stories that are reimagined. In a genre where "skewed belief systems and morality" are tentatively

embraced as useful sites of exploration into territories of fear, horror, and the taboo, the potential for exploring complex and real contemporary issues is abundant.

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