

A Spell for Lunchtime

The spell begins with a list. After searching my pantries not twice in hopes I may be miraculously gifted more food, I write down on paper what I need to buy and say goodbyes to Brutus, who meows his complaints by the door as I go. I pet his head gently and wave back at him as I begin my walk, two miles to my first stop along a grey autumn coastline. I make my way across a beach of pebbles hues ranging from deep sparkling blues to glowing crimson red, wandering near the waterline where the rocks glow the most intensely and stopping every few minutes to admire particularly good ones. My stomach growls as I pocket some for dessert later this week, they will pair nicely with fresh apples and wine. The tree comes into view and I make my way to the end of the tree line, the landscape turning more to that of rocks and distant hills. Pushing forward in the morning chill, listening to the crabs sing their morning chorus. I used to be scared of their song, an eerie choir of tiny voices singing a familiar language, always just a little too far away to make out the words. One day my father took me out to the boathouse and threw a blanket over us, telling me to be as quiet as I could and to listen closely to the ocean. As we sat in silence, I began to hear them in a quiet murmur, gradually growing louder and louder until they were closer than I had ever heard them. Still muffled through the door but now intelligible, I heard for the first time the crabs ballads to the water, the rocks, and the stars.

As I reach my destination I begin to tie my dress up around my waist, wrapping my shoes around my shoulders with a cord and hiking my bag up onto my back. Now in line with the tree, taking a moment to admire her as I always do, a vibrant blue beauty growing thirty feet out in the ocean, giving off a faint light marking her place at night, the flame willow tree we all called Mother Ocean. By following the faint glow of her roots I am able to stay just knee deep as I wade out towards her, being careful not to step too hard to or carelessly on the intricate patterns of moss and algae depicting a time long before humans. As I reach the trunk I feel her lacy arms reach out to me, helping me up to her first branches where I can climb with ease to the knotted branches overlooking the far side, with a view of the expansive ocean, glimmering yet grey and ominous. I look out too see if the lighthouse is in town, but the clifftop is just rolling greenery, empty. I see Verta, meticulously sorting a variety of items both edible and non-edible amongst hanging baskets along the branches, frying from one to a next, either taking or leaving, a look of content intensity in her eyes. I cough to let her know I'm here and I see a quick flash of annoyance in her eyes at being disturbed mid-task before she realizes I'm a customer. There's nothing Verta loves more than business.

She begins to make her way over to me, hoping from one branch to the next with impressive speed for her size. I check over my list one more time before holding it out for her, letting her pinch it in her beak before flying off upwards and out of sight. I had never seen the top of Mother Ocean from within. It's been an unspoken rite of passage for young people in our town to try and climb to her peak and so obviously at fifteen I had packed a few day's worth of food and water and began what I believed would be the first successful adventure to the top of Mother Ocean. Two days and a couple of broken dreams later my father found me at the base of the tree, curled safely in the wispy arms of Mother Ocean. I don't remember much of that climb and nothing at all about my descent, only a dream of riding gently on the wind in a boat made of feathers.

Before I could begin reminiscing further I saw Verta begin her decent downward, a woveb bag gently swinging from her beak. She perched next me and dropped the bag in my lap, I reached inside and pulled out my list along with my groceries. Three of my five items were crossed out in green ink, and the words "*No chestnuts until next rain.*" were written across the bottom in neat cursive. I had never figured out quite how Verta managed to write, and with such precision at that, but she seemed averse to personal questions, preferring only to converse on topics of business. I pulled out a handful of dark brown mushrooms, marveling at the smooth texture of their muffin top heads before running my fingers across their ridged underbelly. Next was a glass jar stuffed to the brim with an assortment of leaves, unsuspecting at first but the transportation vessel to my most fragile ingredient; eggs. I cracked the lid to see what Verta had brought me this time and almost squealed out loud at their glassy pink shells, picturing the rose-gold yolk inside and the delicacy that would soon be my breakfast. Lastly were a variety of potatoes, none larger than my fist but varying in shades of red, purple, and golden brown. The last item on my list, chives, was crossed out but not mentioned in Verta's note. I pointed to it and did my best to describe them, long, thin, green plants with notes of onion or leeks. She cocked her head at me but did not speak, meaning she most likely didn't know I was asking for. I wrote on the back of my list LEEKS or ONIONS and opened it out to her, letting her read it over for a moment before flinching back as she flew past me and upwards back into the branches. I took this time to sort my goods into the many sections of my errand bag, the red pebbles casting a faint glow on the interior as I tried to separate glass from glass and food from dirt. Verta flew back down with a small bunch of spring onions which I accepted happily, pulling out my payment and opening it up for her to inspect. Inside the plastic takeout container was a handful of mud, grass,

and a rather impressive worm ball I had dug out from behind the garden shed the night before. Verta seemed quite happy with this, tipping the contents of the box into the bag she had used for my groceries and giving me an approving look. I pulled myself up, and after saying goodbye in the form of a sunflower seed tossed into the nearest basket I began my descent back down Mother Ocean.

I realized I would have to go on a little further than I planned, chestnuts weren't essential but they sure would be nice and Reigate farm was just a few minutes east of the coastline if I cut along the steep ridgeline up to where the Lighthouse sometimes sat. Blinking a few times as I left the darkened interior of the willow, I looked upwards to my destination realizing that the lighthouse now sat upon the cliff top, towering over the landscape, swaying slowly in the breeze. Huffing and puffing with effort as I climbed the rocky trail towards town, I kept my eyes peeled for the speckled yellow and brown flowers my sister liked with her lunch, picking a few off the rocks as I went and wiping their pungent sap off my fingers. Bitter and sharp, I had never like or even seen the appeal in these so-called delicacies, but Sora had been so busy these past few months she rarely had time to go looking for them and their season would soon be over.

At the top of the ridge the path split, one way towards the lighthouse, one way towards town, and the final path, the one I was taking, wound a small distance down the side of the ridge and into Reigate farm. Rita Reigate was sitting out front as she always had been when I showed up, her border collie, Moxie, curled peacefully at her feet and a bag of chestnuts already encased in her wrinkled grip.

“You used to be faster getting up that hill.”

Rita wasn't mean per say, in fact I had grown up hearing adults sing her praises and boast of what they had seen her do. Now the oldest person in lilac creek county, her skills as an agriculturalist were known to all, but it was another skill that kept people at arms length.

“Well I don't get to class as much as I used to” I quipped back, and I saw her smile as she remembered her teaching days. Most of her former students probably wouldn't share the same reaction as she, I hold back a grimace as I remember the third day of intermediate farming, sweat dripping down my back and forehead as I tried to keep up with her plotting demonstration real time. I shivered as she looked me up and down as I knew what was coming and braced myself to learn what I usually would rather not know.

“You should do something about that, I can see rotation issues in your hips starting around 38 if you do not redirect.”

Rita's uncomfortably personal power of sight defiantly came in handy sometimes, but this raise in her psyche seemed to come with the added side effect of never being able to keep it to herself. Everyone respected Rita, cared for her even, but most did not hang around for extended conversations when the work was done, unwilling to hear how they needed to “redirect”. Her husband, Garve, was the only one to ever seemed unphased by her matter of factness, often joking that he too was gifted in this way, only his powers were for foreseeing what Rita wanted for dinner.

“You want chestnuts, you also wanted chives but decided on your way here it would but just as good with onions and nettle leaves so you don’t need those anymore. Which is good because I don’t have any.”

I shivered. And then I wondered what to say next. I mean. What do you say in response to that? I felt the awkwardness grow the longer I waited to respond but just as I opened my mouth to speak, Moxie leapt up from her place on the ground where she had been quietly content for the last few minutes. Over Rita's shoulder I spotted Garve stepping through the now open door of the farmhouse, beaming at Moxie as she greeted him with a barrage of kisses. Internally I sighed with relief, Garve provided a pleasant barrier between Rita and myself that made conversation slightly easier to navigate.

“Maria! It’s been eternity, I barley remember what you looked like!” I laugh at his hello and go to hug him, I had seen him just days prior at the college library. He taught dialect and language studies and I often stopped by his office to borrow or return books from his class bookshelves.

“It’s good to see you too. Did you get that Shakespear collection in yet?” I asked hopefully. He laughed and shook his head.

“It’s supposed to be here by the first snow, but you never know with those big city librarians. Heads filled with so many stacks of books they don’t know where's up and down anymore. But when it gets here you’ll be the first to know, I’ll send Moxie over with a heads up.” I thanked him profusely then noticed Rita's expression, staring up at Garth with a look of sharp expectance in her eyes. I couldn’t quite read it but Garth clearly did.

“But I don’t want to bore you with too much school talk, I’m assuming you didn’t come here just to see me.” He asked, getting down to business. Rita held out the chestnuts.

“Just those, same as last time?” I asked, Garth nodding at me as I dug in my bag. I pulled out two tins the size of palm and hand them to Garth, taking the chestnuts from Rita who let go the second my hand made contact, causing me to almost drop the bag. For farmers, my mothers face and neck sunscreen was a lifesaver, worth its weight in gold (or chestnuts), and after a summer of studying my mother I had finally achieved a result worthy of trading. Rita, however, only wanted my mothers sunscreen, and so I would bring one of each of them, subtly trying to convince her mine was worthy of the same praise.

Maybe gaining Rita's approval was a lost cause but Garth's was not, and he thanked me kindly for my work, wishing me well as I made my way up the road and back towards home. Instead of retracing my steps and following back along the coastline I decided to take the ridge path home, along the top of the cliffside overlooking the beach and the ocean. The sunlight had made its way out, and the water was now a sparkling blue, gently rippling and crashing against the pebbled beach. I checked my list again as I walked.

Mushrooms

Potatoes

~~*Chestnuts*~~

Eggs

~~*Onions*~~

I struck through the last items for no particular reason and put it back in my bag, satisfied I had everything I needed. The trail back was an easy one, tall grass tickling my ankles when the path was narrow. My stomach had really begun to wake up now, excited for the fruits of my labor to appear on my lunch plate. As the path began to become a series of switchbacks leading to the final stretch of the beach between me and my home, I started to put together the meal in my head, sliding each ingredient into place. Potatoes roasted in duck fat from my fathers pond, sauteed mushrooms and onions, garlic from the garden, toasted chestnuts, topped with silky, rose gold eggs. It was only mid-day but I ready to sit down, and as my house came into view and I

wondered if Brutus would be waiting for me when I got back, or if he was down by the river hounding dragonflies and small fish. Regardless, as soon as I got it, I had a spell to do.