

Dorothy leaned back against the coarse wicker chair and watched the afternoon sunlight fall across the wall of the cottage. It was the last days of spring and already she could detect the heavier fecundity of August steaming up through the soil. She stretched out her solid but shapely legs and caught a glimpse of her reflection in a window. The face that stared back at her was pleasantly attractive. Dorothy's most distinguishing feature was her complexion. She had classically pale Welsh skin with heavy dark eyebrows, and her eyes, ringed with thick black lashes, were somewhere between grey and blue. 'The colour of threatening weather,' her ex-lover used to call it. Above them, her dark hair stood up like an errant haystack. It was the face of a woman in her mid-thirties. Dorothy had no illusions, she knew she looked her age.

'I hope you like nettle tea,' Great-Aunt Winifred sang out. A whiff of a dank smell, not unlike horse manure, drifted out from the kitchen. The old lady placed a steaming cup of tea in front of Dorothy and sat down, her sharp face a road map of wrinkles with two mischievous brown eyes buried below a strong brow. 'Is it medicinal?' Dorothy asked nervously, hoping for a syrupy nectar that would ease the constant heartburn she'd been plagued with ever since she'd given up the London flat, the married lover and the secure job in the archival department of the British Museum. A job, she'd realised, that had little to offer except a state pension upon retirement.

Winifred Cecily Owen gazed critically at her great-niece. At ninety-nine years of age she found that anyone under the age of seventy irritated her. They seemed to have lost the art of selfreliance and, worse than that, the art of happiness. She was convinced they had replaced it with an insatiable need to be entertained. Winifred's generation had been far less demanding. They were simply grateful to have the woods and the streams, the local dances at the nearby army barracks, and to repeat the life rhythms of their parents and grandparents. Why did everyone want so much these days?

The Owens had lived for over four hundred years in a tiny hamlet outside the Welsh village of Llandando. The family had an uneasy relationship with the villagers, who, in all truth, had barely tolerated their outlandish behaviour over the centuries. Generations of Owen women had gloried in their spinsterhood. Every decade or so, one chosen woman would run off only to reappear pregnant, as if blessed by an immaculate conception. And generations of local preachers, vicars and holy men had despaired. They were outraged at the complete lack of guilt the women displayed, as if it were their right to behave in such an ungodly manner, and branded the women witches, spreading the rumour that they were worshippers of Rhiannon, Cerridwen and Arianrhod — the three great goddesses of Cymru — and that their coven lay hidden in a cave in the foothills of North Wales. But despite the rumour, none of the clan of Gynia Mwyn was ever arrested, imprisoned or burned at the stake and so the uneasy truce continued through the ages.

In truth it was a symbiotic relationship. The villagers needed the Owens to provide greater drama than their own petty squabbles and intrigues, while the Owens needed the anonymous sperm donations. Even Dorothy herself had never known her father.

Dorothy was the only Owen, ever, to have left the hamlet and been allowed to return. There had been one who had left before her — her mother's cousin who had emigrated to Australia. The cousin, whose departure was seen as a betrayal, had never been spoken of since. Dorothy herself had barely been forgiven. Her great-aunt blamed the cinema. Edith, Dorothy's mother, had been a flighty, over-imaginative creature who had seen *The Wizard of Oz* at an impressionable age. Winifred was convinced that if Edith had given her daughter a Welsh name, Dorothy would never have wandered. As it was, Dorothy had fled for London at the age of sixteen and had found herself an apprenticeship at the Imperial War Museum. It had taken her another eighteen years to find her way back to Wales.

'You home for good then?' Winifred ventured, reading a fatalism in the slump of her niece's shoulders. The girl had a body, the aunt noted, that seemed prematurely resigned to ageing. 'For a while. I have an interview at Shrewsbury Castle; they're looking for a curator for the museum.' 'The castle! That's a terrible place! I don't know why you would want to work for the English — a mean treacherous race who slaughtered your ancestors!'

Dorothy restrained herself from pointing out that it was the very same race that kept the village's souvenir shop and weekend cottages thriving, preventing it from becoming yet another ghost town. Still, it was the local English weekenders with their four-wheel drives who would regularly pull up outside Winifred's cottage to point out the witch to their restless nose-picking kids. She watched as the nonagenarian poured the tea from a huge silver pot, hands trembling. Winifred's long paisley dress was more reminiscent of the 1960s than an ancient sorceress's gown. It had probably been donated by the local thrift shop; and besides, what witch would get her food delivered by meals on wheels? Certainly not one with any dignity, and dignity was what her ancient relative exuded from every cell of her gnarled body. No, what Great-Aunt Winifred was suffering was the persecution every happily single woman suffers: the predictable social condemnation of her independence and childlessness. Dorothy reminded herself of what she'd learned during a university course on feminist history (with a strong Marxist slant): spinsters are a threat to patriarchy. As she grasped the china cup, she contemplated the possibility of elevating her great-aunt to the status of heroine.

'Still single?' Winifred went straight for the jugular. Dorothy's noble contemplation plummeted to the ground; her great-aunt had an unerring capacity to sniff out anyone's Achilles heel. The young woman blushed and nodded. Feminism aside, she still found it hard not to feel stigmatised by *that* word. 'Nothing to be ashamed of; we Owen women

have a long history of going it alone. One day I'll show you how. They don't call me the Merry Spinster for nothing. Now drink your tea, it'll make your breasts grow.'

Sipping at the scalding brew, Dorothy put the last comment down to approaching dementia. Great-Aunt Winifred was, after all, ninety-nine. It was then that she noticed the knitting bag at her aunt's feet. A mangy sack woven from hoary greenish thread, it was almost indiscernible against the moss-covered slate that paved Winifred's courtyard. Suddenly it jumped, as if something were trapped inside. Dorothy looked again — the fabric definitely seemed to be twitching. Was she hallucinating? Could it be the nettle tea? She glanced back at her aunt, who smiled serenely but not without a certain smug innocence. The bag jumped again, this time unmistakably.

'What's that?' Dorothy pointed to the bag, ensuring there could be no ambiguity. Aunt Winifred pursed her lips, indicating a grievous invasion of privacy.

'Harold. He's a family heirloom — you'll be getting one when I die. And that's all I have to say on the matter.' She gazed blankly up towards the sky. Faking senility, Winifred had discovered in recent years, was an extremely useful ploy. Besides, she knew what the girl needed, even if Dorothy herself didn't.

Meanwhile, Dorothy's imagination took off, soaring right out of the courtyard and up over the grey slate roofs of the village. Witches have familiars. I'll probably get to inherit some flea-bitten stray kitten, or worse still a toad, she thought. The bag twitched again.

Dorothy looked away politely, trying to steer her mind away from the guilty observation that she was projecting onto her aunt the stereotype of hag. It was politically incorrect, and she hated being politically incorrect. Peter, her married ex-lover, had often accused her of being too self-conscious, too aware of making the acceptable move.

Ironically, that was how he'd manipulated her into bed in the first place, playing on her initial rejection of him because he was married. Well, that and her astonishment that he found her desirable. Physical attraction was not something Dorothy had ever associated with her unfashionably buxom body. She wore her shape like a crucifix, blind to her own inherent splendour. There was history in her bones and a stoic grace in the sway of her hips that spoke of Boadicea. A very Celtic sort of beauty.

Dorothy settled into her new job within a couple of weeks. Although far humbler than the Imperial War Museum, Shrewsbury Castle had its own stately grace. Situated on a hill overlooking the town of Shrewsbury and the border counties, the fortress had been built to ward off the fierce Welsh tribes who had ventured into England. Originally medieval, it had been rebuilt in the fourteenth century and fortified again in the seventeenth century, and little now remained of its Norman origins.

Dorothy's office was an octagonal room at the back of the ticket booth. Most of her fellow workers were volunteers; she was one of only two paid staff. Part of her job was to classify the immense collection of historical objects donated to the museum, which ranged from medals to souvenirs picked up on the battlefield. The classification process gave her the illusion of control. It felt therapeutic to sort through the vast pile of medals, each one a minutia of history, as if giving meaning to her own personal chaos.

In the village Dorothy noticed that the name Owen seemed to evoke both dread and a slight hint of envy, especially from the long-suffering wives. As soon as it was known that she was Winifred's kin, people began to shun her. One woman in the supermarket openly referred to her great-aunt as that 'crazy old lesbian'. She even mentioned a live-in girlfriend during the war, but when Dorothy confronted her the housewife became suddenly vague. 'You don't look like an Owen,' she muttered, turning to the frozen peas.

Dorothy found she didn't mind the isolation; there was a certain solace in her exile. It appealed to the martyr in her and somehow legitimised the indulgence of her grief over the loss of her lover. She took to conjuring up less attractive memories during solitary walks through the nearby mountains and woods, as a means of finally exorcising him: the large white hairy belly that flopped over his trousers; his arrogance; the way he constantly criticised her and then expected her to counsel him about his marital problems. She also began to rely more and more on her great-aunt.

Winifred had insisted on setting Dorothy up in the little house adjacent to her cottage, furnishing it with the meagre pieces Edith had left after her death. Winifred cherished having a relative to confide in again, and many a night Dorothy found herself trapped in front of her aunt's gas fire, listening to yet another tale of the Gynia Mwyn and their extraordinary female lineage.

The ancient spinster was busy herself. She had decided to dedicate the next few months to putting her affairs in order, as she was convinced that she would die at the end of summer. As befitted a woman who loathed the English, Winifred was a staunch anti-royalist and was determined, to the point of death, not to be a recipient of the Queen's obligatory telegram on her hundredth birthday.

At six o'clock on a cold wet late-summer's morning, Dorothy was woken by a loud banging on the front door and the news she had been dreading.

The church organist stood there, clutching the morning papers over his head. 'Get decent, girl, your great-aunt's decided to die.' Dorothy pulled her raincoat over her flannel nightdress and rushed through the heavy drizzle to Winifred's cottage. Winifred lay in the nineteenth-century brass bed, her skin pulled taut and transparent across her bones. She was arguing with the local priest. 'No, Keelan, I will not make my last

confession. I've got nothing to atone for and the Lord himself can testify to that.' Her head fell back against the pillows, the effort of speech exhausting her.

You've not made an appearance in church for over twenty years.' The priest, a large florid-faced man with a well-known drinking problem, was insistent. 'I beg to differ,' Winifred snapped back. 'I have *never* stepped into that heathen place of superstition!' The priest barely controlled his temper. 'There you go, blaspheming on your deathbed! That's enough to send you to the wrong place right there, if you get my meaning.' He leaned back, quaking with anger. He was determined to be the first to convert an Owen, even if it killed her in the process. Dorothy sat quietly at her great-aunt's head. She noticed that Winifred was clutching her knitting bag against the yellowed lace bed coverlet. 'Pagan I am, pagan I die. It's what you've all been accusing me of for decades anyway. Oh, the hypocrisy! It's enough to hasten my end, and I'm not due to die until four o'clock.' She turned her face blindly towards her great-niece. 'Dorothy, is that you?' 'It is.' Dorothy tentatively reached across and took Winifred's hand into her own. The flesh was so withered it felt like the claw of death itself. 'Tell this self-appointed social worker to piss off so I can get on with the delicate act of passing over,' the old woman hissed. Dorothy ushered the priest into the hallway. 'Father, it might be better . . . ' 'I should have known she'd react that way. They're a stubborn bunch of heathens, the Owens. I'll be praying you don't go the same way.' Propelled by a rush of familial loyalty, Dorothy pushed the tenacious cleric out into the rain. Back in the bedroom her great-aunt was humming the 'Internationale' under her breath. For a moment Dorothy thought she might have fallen into total dementia. But then Winifred's eyes fluttered open. 'Come here, child, it's almost time. The goddess will come for me on the hour.' She clutched at Dorothy's skirt. 'Auntie, don't say that.' 'Enough with the bullshit.' With a supreme effort Winifred held up her knitting bag. It jiggled slightly in the candlelight. 'This is what I'll be leaving you.' Dorothy's eyes widened with apprehension as she braced herself for a hedgehog or, worse still, some endangered rodent, like a pygmy shrew, when Winifred reached dramatically into the bag and pulled out a withered root. Dorothy tried hard to conceal her bewilderment. 'It's lovely,' she muttered in an unconvincing manner. Ignoring her niece's lack of enthusiasm, the old woman dangled the vegetation proudly. It hung like a limp turnip. Dorothy peered closer. It looked like a large twisted stem of ginger and was covered in strange reddish hair-like roots. Winifred pressed it into Dorothy's hand. 'Never betray the mandrake,' she gasped. Then, as the grandfather clock chimed four, she died, her bony hand still fastened around her niece's wrist.

They buried Winifred's ashes at her favourite spot on the riverbank, according to the complicated instructions she had left in her will. 'Unconsecrated land,' the mourners whispered knowingly to each other as Dorothy got down on her hands and knees to place the strange pewter casket into the damp black earth. The local men's choir broke into a Welsh folk song — Winifred had specified no religious music — the tenor voices swelling and floating up with the evening mist. Above the funeral proceedings hovered

a single black raven. Dorothy looked up at the bird, then down at the rushing water. A wave of loneliness swept over her. Now she was the only one left, the last of the clan. A middle-aged woman dressed flamboyantly in a long silk dress approached her. A ravaged face that must once have boasted a handsome beauty peered out from under an enormous hat. She took Dorothy's hand and drew it towards her bosom. 'I knew your great-aunt. She was one of the circle. One of the ancient ones. She's up there now,' she whispered dramatically, pointing to the contoured disk of the rising moon already visible in the steely sky. 'Up there, riding with Arianrhod on a great white mare toward Caer Arianrhod to join her sisters. One day you too shall inherit the mantle.' The woman released Dorothy's hand and, with a studied swish of her skirts, turned and walked across the muddy embankment towards a waiting BMW. Dorothy noticed several of the parishioners crossing themselves as the stranger cut across their path.

Later that night Dorothy sat on her narrow single bed and watched the shadows cast by the fire dancing across the wooden roof beams. The silence was profound. She reached across and picked up the mandrake root from the cherrywood table beside the bed. She slowly turned it in her hands. What does one do with a mandrake root? Cook it? Eat it? Plant it? She held it up to her face. A strong musk radiated from it, strangely animal, even familiar. She tried to think where she knew the scent from, but the memory kept escaping her. She turned it upside down. The root had feathery offshoots that looked as if they belonged in soil. She went downstairs and searched around for a flower pot and some potting mix, then planted the root carefully, treating it like a bulb, making sure that the tip showed just above the soil. She left the pot on the kitchen table, went back upstairs and fell asleep after listening to a debate on the radio on the pros and cons of fox hunting. She dreamt of nothing. The next morning she was woken by a tickling under her nose. She sneezed and opened her eyes. An invisible hair kept stroking her cheek. She sat up, glanced at the pillow and screamed out loud. Curled up comfortably in a little indentation in the pillow lay a penis — in repose, one might say. Dorothy was transfixed. Her brain whirled madly, trying to absorb the illogical and surreal sight of an unattached male organ asleep. She took a few deep breaths, trying to regain control, and looked away, but her eyes inevitably crept back to the sight. The penis still lay there, curled with an air of conceit. In fact it seemed to be waking up; disbelievably, Dorothy watched it grow tumescent before her very eyes. It was about six and a half inches long, uncircumcised, with long black pubic hair. With a shudder it flipped itself onto its shiny heavy testicles and waddled towards her, now unmistakably erect. Dorothy shrieked, leapt out of bed and onto a chair. The penis — moving like something between a rabbit and a small dog — also leapt off the bed and onto the carpet where it waited hopefully at the foot of the chair. They had reached an impasse: Dorothy, too terrified to move, and the penis, standing pert before her, a little too eager to please. They stayed like that for a good ten minutes. Until the phone rang. 'Don't you dare move!' Dorothy yelled. With a timid shudder the organ waddled a few inches back on its balls. She tentatively climbed off the chair then bolted down the narrow wooden stairs and grabbed the phone. It was her employer, Mr Carrington, concerned that she hadn't arrived at work

yet. 'I'm having some difficulty with a small animal . . . a rodent — no, not a rat exactly . . . I'll be in late.' Dorothy put the phone down, her heart still thumping in her throat. Behind her she heard a gentle thudding. She swung around; the penis was hopping down the stairs towards her. There was something pathetically vulnerable about the way it launched itself blindly off the last step, flying through the air to land with a painful bounce on the Persian rug she'd inherited from her aunt. Her aunt! So this was what had been twitching in the knitting bag. Now she understood why Winifred was known as the Merry Spinster.

The penis inched forward and rubbed itself against Dorothy's bare foot. She pulled back immediately, but then a perverse curiosity made her stretch her foot back towards the expectant organ again. It felt silky, the touch of that velvet skin deliciously familiar. She was reminded of those stolen afternoons, lying back in the motel bed, stroking her lover into submission. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to be caressed. It was not an entirely unpleasant sensation. The penis rubbed itself backwards and forwards like a cat; Dorothy could practically hear it purring. The clock in the hallway chimed ten. She'd promised to be at work in half an hour. The organ flopped itself seductively over her foot and appeared to look up at her. What was she going to do? She couldn't leave it alone in the house.