

Twenty Seven

Cushla prepares her room. Sprinkles sweet rose water and orange blossom in corners, immerses herself in a bath heavy with sea salt. She knows what to do, has watched it happen once before. Once was enough to print the pattern indelibly in her mind. She had not been meant to see, but she had.

Aged seven and tired of the constant mellow beauty of the Palace, she had kissed her nurse, cancelled her afternoon's lessons in ancient Greek and modern Cantonese and taken a walk into the town. She was safe, the people were happy, the land easy, any child could walk for ten miles round without a parent wondering where they were or if they were safe. A little Princess could walk further than most. At least that was how the myth went.

Cushla wandered on, nibbling at her packed lunch as she went. Quails eggs and olive bread and fresh caviar and mature brie. A small vial of chilled champagne and a little box of raisins to finish. She went through the Palace gates, a backwards tourist in her own land. The guards nodded to her in barely perceptible gestures of their ramrod trained backs, and she continued down the new cobbled steps into the city streets. She walked through the nice part of town and the nicer part of town and the nicest part of town. She walked until she did not know where she was walking anymore. Until her lunch was finished and it was time to go on or go back.

At the point of decision there was a river to cross or a different path home or a forest. Cushla chose to walk into the trees. She wanted to walk in dark green. She entered the forest and much too soon there were bluebells and forget-me-nots and a clearing. A small house with curling chimney smoke and creeping honeysuckle and sunflowers three heads taller than

the child Cushla. But despite the sun filtering bright through the trees, the cottage was encased in dark green shade. She crept up to a window, her bare feet squeaking against damp grass, small insects running for cover. She pulled herself to tiptoe height and looked directly into the workroom of the Compassion Fairy. Where the Compassion Fairy created love and wonder and passion and joy. The workroom where the Compassion Fairy created heartsease from the discarded hearts of others.

The Compassion Fairy was leaning over an old man. Even with her tender years of inexperience, the Princess could see he was tired, age had worked on him for years and now his eyes were rheumy, his joints arthritic, his back stooped. Even in Palace land, age eventually brought its distractions. But his heart was still pumping blood and love, he still kissed his wife of fifty years every morning and every night. Still held tight to her hand in his sleep. Still asked her opinion and love before he made any decision. And she'd been dead fifteen years. The Compassion Fairy knew this and the time had come for the old man to pay his dues. She smiled sweetly and leant over him, tightening the bonds on his ankles and wrists, "You've had fifty years of her love, you don't need it any more."

"But I don't know how to live without her."

"You'll learn old man. Come on now, I gave you an extra fifteen years. I could have made you stop this loving lark when she was cold and dead in the ground."

"But she isn't. She's alive in my heart."

The Compassion Fairy nodded sagely, "My point exactly."

The old man was crying, Cushla's feet were sore from standing on tiptoe, the Compassion Fairy was impatient.

"Time's up, old guy. Give it away."

The Compassion Fairy leant forward and with a sharpened fingernail ripped open the man's cotton shirt. His old man's chest was concave thin, the sparse thatch of grey hair no match for the cold of the air in the workroom - a constant 10 degrees to keep the love fresh - or the heat of the Compassion Fairy's blade. Cushla watched transfixed. Under his liver blotched skin she could see his heart beat fast against his ribs, a caged bird readying itself for flight. The Compassion Fairy twisted the old man's tied hands above his head, pushed him back against the wooden table, arching his back up and closer to the knife. With one hand she held his hands and with the other she carefully sliced through his flesh. The man's scream was drowned out by the gentle lullaby the Compassion Fairy sang. Dropping the knife on the table, she reached into the body cavity, up and under the ribcage until she held his heart tight. The lullaby and the soft stroke of her hand on his heart soothed the man, she let go of his hands and his arms fell limply behind his head. She kissed his eyes as she severed the veins linking him to life. The heart did not know that its man was dead, in the Compassion Fairy's hand it pumped itself in time to her crooning lullaby. Cushla's little girl feet were aching, her calves screaming out with overstretched cramp, her fingers numb from clawing the windowsill, but still she watched.

The Compassion Fairy took the heart to her workbench, deftly sliced it into four. "One for kisses, one for wishes, one for passion and one for love." She talked to herself and sang snatches of the lullaby at the same time. She measured and analyzed each section before placing the heart quarters in four separate jars. She added rose water and orange blossom to each one and then sealed them up. She kept singing. Behind her the door opened and an old lady walked into the room. The old man rose from the table, the bonds on his arms and legs untying themselves. The man smiled at the woman. He walked free to her, held her in his arms and kissed her. Then the old lady lifted up the man and carried him out over the threshold. The two of them went out the front door and away from the house. Cushla tried to

follow their progress but once they had passed the shade of the house and walked into the sunlight she couldn't see them any more. The Compassion Fairy didn't turn from her work. She heard her front door open and close, sang out "Goodnight" and "Thankyou" over the sixteenth verse of her lullaby.

Cushla watched the Compassion Fairy at work until night fell. Watched her make love potions for heartsick boys and bravery mixes for underwhelmed girls. Listened as she fashioned baby kisses from the continual lullaby. When the last ray of sun left the forest, the Compassion Fairy came to her front door and offered Cushla a lantern.

"This will help you light your way home. I hope you've paid attention. Though I would not wish it to happen, you may need the lesson one day. However, should you actually do the deed yourself, remember to cut fine and clear, but whatever you do, don't listen to the heart when it pleads."

She handed Cushla the light and with a pale and gentle hand she ruffled the little seven year old head. Then she smack slapped Cushla's face hard and added, "And don't you dare bloody well come snooping around here again, nosey spoilt little brat!"

Cushla stands in her ivory tower, windows open to the old buffet of London spread before her. She waits in silence and listens for pleading. There is none. Good, she must be early. She turns on every light in the flat, her rooms a welcoming beacon to the cold night. She lays a clean white sheet over the wooden floor, removes her black silk robe and steps naked to the centre of the white. She holds the blade in her right hand, lifts her breast away with the left. The first incision is easy, a straight cut under the breast. The pain is minor, Cushla is used to the cut of many knives. She completed her own ritual scarification when she was nine, two years earlier than her maternal grandmother - the previous holder of the

Palace record. She then slices down and across the first cut, peeling open her heartspace like a fig. She looks in. It is there. Tiny, pitiful, but definitely there. Cushla hears the singing and then the small pleading, hears but does not listen. Cancels her aural senses and swiftly cuts out the baby heart. The whole process takes approximately two minutes, Cushla loses no more than three fluid ounces of blood. She leaves the square of white cotton, walks to her open window and throws the small piece of her own meat down to the street where it is seized on by a passing Pekinese and swallowed whole. The Pekinese immediately loses its habitual nastiness and irritating yappy bark and surprises its owners by playing sweetly with their child the next day. It also loses its inbred sneer and therefore its title at Crufts the following year.

Cushla is very learned. She knows more than most. But she has no experience in the ways of the heart. She does not understand how love grows, that it is not always possible to remove it whole. There are creeping malignancies of lust and desire that can mutate into love in the blink of a beautiful eye.

In Stoke Newington High Street the Prince is sleeping. But lying on the table locked into its gazelle skin sheath, his hunting blade twitches and groans. There is a job still to do.