

Seven: Hag

Ellen: It's a funny thing, Father, but there is a certain freedom in finding out that something you spent your life believing is actually untrue. You feel like, I don't know, like you've been held up by a structure, a scaffold, and then suddenly you push past the top of the scaffold and you're clear and in the air. It's scary that the scaffold is gone, that you don't have anything to hold you safe, but there's also this crazy feeling of release. You feel drunk with it. The possibilities. When you're not tied to a truth, then anything can be true. Feels that way, anyway.

I mean, sure, at first you feel as if the ground has fallen away, that you can't find a way to steady yourself. You feel like you can't trust anything.

But that's learning the world, right, Father? Because you can't trust most things. Most people. That's why when you find someone you can trust, you hold onto them. You fight for them.

I've always heard about people who do what Ma and Aidan were doing. People who would dig up bodies of the freshly dead and sell them to medical schools. Body-snatchers, they call them, or Resurrection Men. And I had heard that some of them were too impatient to wait for an available corpse, so instead of sneaking into the Potter's Field some midnight, they would find someone who was sick or weak, someone who wouldn't be missed and sort of...help them along. Common murder, is what it is, not honest work.

You know, I don't know why I wasn't as horrified with Ma as I was with Aidan, when I looked through the curtain and saw the back room business. It was the blood on his hands, I suppose, but it was more than that. Because we all have a little blood on our hands, if you see what I mean. But Ma had looked, I don't know, somber like, as if she was doing something she

had to but that she found very unpleasant. A necessary evil. But Aidan. Aidan looked excited. Like he was having the time of his life. His eyes were lit up like he was watching a pretty girl. He looked happy. Eager. And when he looked over and saw me at the curtain, he looked positively gleeful.

[Theme music; credits]

For a week or so afterward, I did a good job at avoiding him. I had confronted Ma about what was happening in the back room, and she hadn't denied it. "We're just working folk," she said. "We have to pay the butcher, don't we?" Okay, I *was* horrified at Ma. But I was scared of Aidan. He kept trying to corner me, to get me to talk, but I was able to get away or call to Sinead or Samuel.

But then, the day before I finally left, he caught me in the doorway to my room. I was going down, first thing in the morning, to get the shop opened up, and Aidan was coming in from his night out. He blocked me in the doorway, spreading out his arms and trapping me on the threshold. He told me I shouldn't be peeking at things I wasn't ready to see, and I told him that he was a common murderer, that it was no wonder his own mother had thrown him away. And when I said that, he stopped, and his face broke into a slow smile that made me uneasy.

"Well now," he said, "aren't you the blackest kettle to ever point a finger at the pot."

I asked what that was supposed to mean, and he dropped his arms and waved me out of the room, like he was bowing to a lady.

I said again: "What do you mean, Aidan?"

And he said: "Why don't ask that old shopwoman downstairs?"

"What old shopwoman? You mean Ma?"

And he laughed. "Don't pretend you've ever laid eyes on your natural ma," he said. "It's pathetic to watch you put on airs, like you aren't a throwaway like the rest of us."

I didn't rise to his bait, Father, you'll be proud to hear. I tossed my head and went downstairs. But it gnawed at me. I couldn't quit thinking about what he said. And finally, after laying awake all night, the next day I caught Ma alone in the shop and I asked her.

"I'm the only one of us is really yours, right Ma?" I said.

And she didn't answer me. Not right away. There was a little pause. A little shifting of her eyes, and I knew the look. It was the look she had when she needed to think up a lie quick. It didn't last long--Ma's a natural liar and she doesn't take much time to come up with a good one. But this time she just said, "Haven't I always told you so?"

Which is about as obvious a stack of shit as could be, if you see what I mean.

I know I told you I ran away that day because she wanted me to help out more, Father. I have to confess that was a lie. Sorry. You can't trust anybody. We had the biggest screaming fight we had ever had, and she finally admitted that it was true. That she wasn't my mother. That my real mother had sold me to Ma because she needed money for gin. She had paid her three dollars when I was four months old, and even twenty years ago that's not a lot of money. I don't even know if she was Irish.

I told all of this to Saoirse the first night we sat up talking. She knows all of it. So I don't know why I didn't tell you right off the top. After everything that's happened it seems silly to still be angry with Ma. But all those years of being in that house. Dealing with Aidan, and them

others. Wishing my life was something else, but feeling like I had ties. Like at least I had blood.

Right before I left, right before it blew up for good and all, Ma was pleading with me. And she said something that finally made sense. Ma said, "Ellen, family ain't about blood. The truest families are the ones we choose for ourselves."

And that felt right, Father. That felt like a truth that had been hidden beneath the lies. I looked at her, my "Ma," standing there in the shop, her face red with arguing, her hands reaching out to me, and what she said felt real. So I told her.

"You're right," I had said. "We *can* choose our own families. So why in God's name would I choose this one?"

And I left. I ran, Father. I ran right to Saoirse.

After that hag caught me in the alley, I ran to Saoirse as well. I twisted to the side and pulled free, and I ran, leaving my basket laying there, spilled out across the cobblestones. I wasn't afraid for me, not really. I just needed to be with Saoirse. I needed my family.

She was in the little dollhouse room, between the parlor and the bedroom, sitting at her little vanity table, when I came in from the street and knelt beside her. I spilled it all to her in a rush, how the hag had caught me in the alley, what she had said. Saoirse dropped her brush and put her arms around me, whispering calm into my hair.

"Who is she?" I said. "What does she want? She's not part of Dr. DeQuincey's schemes."

"No," said Saoirse. "She has followed me from home."

"From...your home? She's of the fae?"

"She is..." Saoirse stood up, and I saw her face tighten. Like she was steeling herself. "She is

a faerie hag, and she has many names. Black Anges. Nelly Longarms. The Old Woman of Claddaghduff. Clooth na Bare. She is a cailleach, a yaga."

"I don't know what that means," I said. And Saoirse said, "It means she is very powerful and very dangerous. I shudder that she put her hands on you."

"Why does she want you?" I asked. Saoirse had never been this open with me. I wanted to find out everything I could. "Why does she say you were stolen?"

"Because she is my mother," said Saoirse.

I blurted out, "That ancient hag is your ma?" and then said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"To my sorrow, she is my mother," Saoirse said. "She is a wicked creature, a cannibal and a shape-shifter. She steals children and leaves goblins in their place. She is a haunter and a deceiver and a harbinger. I rue that her blood runs in my veins."

"You left her," I said, realizing. "You're a runaway just like me!"

"I left the place we lived," Saoirse said. "Yes. I came into the streets of the city and I hid from her. And while I hiding from her, Dr. DeQuincey caught me."

I asked her why the old woman sulked around the house and lurked in the alleys. "If she's found you," I said, "why doesn't she try to take you back?"

"Because the same charms that bind me keep her away, repelling her as surely as they hold me in thrall."

And then I saw how much harder it was going to be, Father. It wasn't just helping Saoirse escape the house, escape the doctor. Her mother was waiting outside the walls. She would have to be dealt with as well.

"You're safe," I told Saoirse, and I kissed her. "I'll keep you safe." But Father, I was just

talking. I had no idea what that meant or how to do it.

"You help me escape from this house," Saoirse said. "And *I* will keep *you* safe."

I sat with that for a little while. She was so kind, and so lovely, and in such a short time she had become the most important thing in my world. I remembered what she had done to the man in the front room, once the charm had been taken away. How fast it was, and how tiny Saoirse had reduced him to a drooling heap on the floor with a touch. I thought about how little I really understood of her.

"Do you miss it?" I asked. She was being so open. I wanted to keep her talking. "Your home, I mean." It was nearly time to get ready, and I had taken her green silk gown out of the little wardrobe.

"I wish I could take you there," said Saoirse. "I wish you could see the host riding from Knocknarea, hear Niamh calling 'away, come away!'"

"The faerie host?" I said, and I dimly remembered one of Ma's stories. "The rade that rides from under the hills? You've seen it?"

"I have sat the horses of the Tuatha de Danann as they rode by their hundreds into the twilight," she said. "The banners streaming in the wind of our passage, the moonlight shining in the hair of the courtiers. Love is less kind than the grey twilight, and hope is less dear than the dew of the morn."

Her eyes were shining as she spoke, and I felt something in my chest. An ache like I wanted something I couldn't ever have. Not the ache I felt for Saoirse herself, that was always there, underneath everything. This was bigger, a feeling of happy sadness, if that makes sense. Like nostalgia for something that never happened. That sounds stupid, I suppose.

I said, "Will you take me there?" And Saoirse looked at me so suddenly, and her face went from surprised to sad in a glimmering instant.

"Oh no, Ellen," she said. "If ever you set foot in my country, you would forfeit forever the right to return. You cannot cross those fields twice."

Saoirse's eyes are the largest I've ever seen, blue and green and liquid and full of herself. I heard her and understood her, and I knew there was more in that strange place than just the beautiful host she had described. There were goblins and phookas and Clutch and O'Donald and her mother. It was as deadly as it was alluring, if you see what I mean. And I knew that. And I said, "Take me anyway. I only want to be where you are." And Saoirse put her hand against my cheek and smiled.

The performance went off with no hitches that night. I watched through the curtains, and no one told me not to. She spoke with several customers, men and women who came and sat in the room and marveled at her doll-like size and regal bearing. There were condescending comments about how articulately she spoke, but no one suggested touching her or questioned her physical attributes. No one took liberties. Dr. DeQuincey was not in the room.

But later, after the customers had gone and Saoirse had changed back into her shift and we were in the bedroom, I heard voices in the house. Saoirse had already climbed the steps to her bed, and I told her to wait there while I saw what it was. I went out onto the balcony on the landing.

Dr. DeQuincey was in the foyer, talking with a man dressed in black with a low cloth cap. Their hands were withdrawing from each other, and I heard the clink of money. I heard the doctor say, "This sounds like something we can both feel good about," and the other man turned

to leave.

Just as he opened the door, the doctor clapped him on the back and he turned and smiled. The foyer was full of shadows, and I couldn't quite see the man's face under the brim of his cap, but I already felt a nagging fear.

At that moment, as if to justify my fear, Deirdre began crying. Her unmistakable wail rose for behind the door right next to the doctor and his sinister friend, and my blood ran like ice. Someone was going to die.

The noise startled both men, and they looked at Deirdre's door. The doctor said something to reassure the other man, but I couldn't hear him. I felt like a net was closing in, a net I couldn't see and didn't know how to stop. I took a step back, I don't even know where I was going, but I had to run. But I stumbled, and as I grabbed the railing to steady myself, I suddenly saw Mr. Clutch, squatting in the shadows by the top of the stairs, grinning that hideous grin of his. I screamed, and both men in the foyer looked up.

And everything pulled into sharp, terrible focus. I knew why the doctor had looked so calculating the night before, and I also knew that the time for decisions had passed. All our time was used up.

The man standing at the door, who had just handed money to Dr. DeQuincey and who the doctor had clapped on the back, was Aidan.

[Theme music; credits]

