

Three: Unseelie

Ellen: I think it was that first night, waiting for Saoirse, that I saw the painting. Like everything else in Saoirse's dressing room, it's much smaller than a standard painting, and it hangs low on the wall near the door to her bedroom. I got on my knees to see it. I spent most of my time in Saoirse's room on my knees.

It's a portrait of a faerie in a grove of trees, crouching in the center of a red and white toadstool, her pale green dress spreading out around her feet, cascading over the edge of the toadstool. She has large trailing wings rising from her back, and she is shining with a bright white light that radiates out from her. The faerie is the center of a swirling confusion of images-- leaves and branches and squirrels and badgers and birds and other animals more dimly glimpsed. And other faeries: little flying faeries like butterflies and odd misshapen goblins holding rusty knives and small dark boys with twigs in their hair and secret smiles. And in the center of all this is this beautiful glowing woman, like the queen of them all, looking directly at you, watching you as you watch her.

And you can tell that it's supposed to be Saoirse. It's not exactly her face, but it's close enough that there's no doubt it's what the painter was trying for.

Or maybe I only thought that because it was in her room. She was in the front of my mind, if you see what I mean, from that day to this. But I don't think I was imagining it. I remember thinking it was some elaborate promotion for the show. "The King of Elfland's Daughter." But then I thought it couldn't be. It was an actual painting, done in I don't know what, oils? Anyway real paint, not a poster or a handbill. Such intricate detail, every smile and eye and hand and claw

like it could lift off the canvas and move. A real artist had done this. I moved my face closer and tried to take in every inch.

And then I noticed something. At first I thought it was soot or dirt scattered across the painting. But when I tried to wipe it off I found it was actually places where the paint had worn away. Little spots here and there, where the image was blurred or wiped clear away. And if you looked closely, you could see that underneath that wondrous picture was another one. And where the painting you noticed first was bright with greens and blues and that shining light from the Saoirse-faerie in the center, the one underneath was darker. You couldn't tell what it was, there were only small peeks. But it looked like a similar thing, just darker. What I mean is, you could see, for instance, that there was a different faerie woman underneath the one in the center, but she wasn't bright and shining. Her colors were black and red, and her dress was torn and dirty. It was as if the painting on top, the one you saw when you didn't look closely, was trying to hide something. Something scary.

A weird thing happened then. I thought not of Saoirse, but of Ma. The way she pretended to be a shopkeeper; the way she had another business in the back room. Ma looked okay on the surface, but if you looked too closely, you could see what was really there. Or at least glimpse that something wasn't as it should be. And I thought of those faerie stories Ma loved, and I thought of that big fight we had.

That's why I didn't hear her come back. The first I knew she was in the room was when she spoke from just behind my shoulder. She said a word I had never heard before.

"Palimpsest."

I must have looked at her funny, because she said it again, like I was an idiot child.

"It's a palimpsest," she said. "It used to be one thing, and they painted over it, to change it. To hide it."

I was still confused, and startled, so I didn't catch myself. I said, "It reminded me of my ma," and Saoirse looked at me so strangely, like she was shocked and sad.

I remembered myself then and spoke quickly to cover what I'd said. I said, "So they just paint right on top of the first one?"

Saoirse looked at the faerie picture, reached out her tiny hand to touch the face that looked so much like hers. She nodded. "But the first one shows through," she said. She was speaking very softly. "They can't keep it from showing itself."

"It seems dishonest," I told her, and maybe I was still thinking of ma.

Saoirse shook her head and looked right in my eyes. I felt that electricity again. "Oh, no," she said. "A palimpsest is the truest painting there is."

[Theme music; opening credits]

I learned the routine pretty quickly. I sleep in the room with Saoirse, in the bedroom behind the dressing room, which has the same mix of regular sized furniture and dollhouse chairs as the front room. Her bed is raised and wide, or I should say wide for her. It's probably the size of the bed I shared with Emma back home. Saoirse has to climb a set of wooden steps, three in all, the crawl in. My bed is the same size, really, but plainer.

The shows run late, so the mornings really don't start until around noon. I wake before her, and then prepare her bath and lay out her clothes. Her day clothes are simple enough. The flash and finery is just for the show, for her to pretend to be the King of Elfland's Daughter. During the

day she dresses in plain linen blouses and homespun skirts. I never found out where the clothes come from--someone had to make them special, and she has a wardrobe full of both plain and fancy.

I don't know if you want to hear all of this. It might be more than you'd think you need, to offer absolution. But as long as we're here we might as well talk, right? Neither of us is going anywhere. Not yet. And anyways, it might take more than a few Our Fathers to scrub me clean. You already know enough to see that's true, don't you?

All of the denizens take their meals together in a little kitchen room at the back of the ground floor. I'm not allowed to eat with them, but I do walk Saoirse down there, and that's how I first got a look at the others.

Deirdre is an old woman, not as old as the hag who called to me from outside the window, but pretty old. She's always wrapped in an old cloak that she keeps pulled tight. She looks kind, but sad, like Dr. DeQuincey said. She smiles at me when she sees me. Mr. Clutch smiles too, but it never feels friendly or comforting. He's a small man, not small like Saoirse, but regular small. He's shorter than me, and built broad. He wears shabby old clothes too big for him, and a wide floppy hat that he never takes off. His face is thick and leathery, with heavy brows that make him look mean. He smiles at me like I'm a sweetmeat. I don't like him.

The worst one, though, is O'Donald. He's tall, like naturally tall, but standing next to those others he looks like a giant. He's got long scraggled hair that I wish someone would wash, and this ugly underbite, with sharp-looking teeth sticking up over his lip. He's got a hat, too, a rusty red cap that fits close over his head. I guess they're all in costume, wearing clothes for the exhibition, though Saoirse doesn't wear her show clothes during the day. I say that because

O'Donald carries a wicked-looking knife, curved and sharp, stuck through his belt. The blade is almost as long as Saoirse is tall. I can't think why he'd need something like that.

There's also a little woman who cooks for us all, her name is Grace, and she almost never speaks. Then there's Talbot, the butler I'd already met, and Dr. DeQuincey, and me. That's the household. None of the other denizens seem to have personal servants.

The house calls itself "Dr. DeQuincey's Unseelie Court." I asked the doctor what "unseelie" meant and he said it was a word from the old country. Which isn't an answer, but that's how Dr. DeQuincey talks. The doors open just after dark, and people start lining up as the sun goes down. Even after weeks working there, I still don't know how they know about it. There's not a big sign, and I don't think the doctor does much to advertise. It's not in a part of town where you expect a show. I suppose people tell other people? Or maybe he advertises in places where don't usually go. The people who come are always well-dressed, like they've got money. They're usually nervous, the women giggly, the men acting gruff to feel like they're in control. But you can tell they're not sure what they're in for. If the weather's nice, they get to go into the back yard, where there are what Dr. DeQuincey calls "attractions." I didn't get to see these until a week or so after I started.

And then, by ones or twos, they get led into the house and into the rooms of the denizens. I don't see most of this happen. I help Saoirse get ready for her audience, and then I wait in the dollhouse room for her to be done. It was a while before I was brave enough to peek through the curtain and see what happens in the parlor, and by that point I...well, everything in its time, if you see what I mean.

I guess what I'm trying to get you to see is how different the whole thing is from life at the rag and bone shop. Day to day life there is sitting behind a counter, and the custom we get

certainly aren't well-dressed rich folk. Ma opens early and stays open late, and we do most of the work. Some of the others--Sinead, Samuel, Sean, sometimes Emma--go out and find things to sell in the shop. They might go digging in the mud by the river, or they might dig through rubbish heaps or they might pinch a bauble or two from a market stall if nobody's looking close. They're younger so they can get away with it. The older ones help Ma with the back room business. And Roisin. Roisin works at night and I don't ask her what she does. But I know.

So that's why I had to leave. No other reason. Ma says I'm too old to be hanging around the shop all day. That I need to start doing more to help the family. Even though we're not family. It makes me sick to think of doing what Roisin does. She comes home at dawn and I hear her crying. And fuck that, if you see what I mean.

And the back room business. It scares me more than anything I know. I've watched through that curtain too. And I can't do that. I can't even look at Aidan anymore. So Dr. DeQuincey's place is strange, and I've seen all manner of oddness, but it's still better than Ma's. At first it was better.

Sometimes I get sent on errands, to the market for food or little jewels or knick-knacks for one of the denizen's shows. And I pay for them with money Talbot gives me, honest and right. But most of my days are spent with Saoirse. And after the show is over, my nights are spent with Saoirse too.

She probably sounded a little haughty when I described meeting her. You probably thought she just thought of me as a servant. But that changed right away. That first night, she asked me about my family, and I told her. This was in the bedroom. We sat on her bed and I combed out her hair. Her hair is deep and thick and black, like plunging your hands into a river of silk. It raised gooseflesh on my arms to touch her. I was careful at first, because she's so small and looks

so fragile. But I learned pretty quick she was strong. Stronger than anybody I've ever met. I felt like I could say anything to her. So when she asked I told her everything.

I told her about the back room, and I told her about Roisin crying at dawn. I told her what Aidan had said to me and why ma and I fought and why I left. I told her I felt trapped in the rag and bone shop. Like I had to escape. I don't know what got into me. I said things to her I haven't ever said out loud. Things I can't say even to Sinead or Roisin, because they'd just tell Ma.

And when I finished talking she turned around on the bed and looked at me. We were sitting so close our legs touched. There were tears in her eyes! I don't know that anybody ever cried because of me, not in my whole life. I dropped the brush, and I started to tell her not to cry, that it wasn't important. Because I already wanted to take care of her. I already felt like...

But she reached up and put her hand against my mouth. That's the first time she had touched me. Her hand felt warm and alive. The words died in my mouth. And she said, "I know what it means to be trapped. We are all of us hostages. You're with me now." And I didn't know what she meant, not yet.

What I remember is that I felt safe. That's the word I finally settled on. It's not something I had felt, not really, because "comfortable" and "familiar" aren't the same thing as "safe," even if you can fool yourself into thinking they are. Sitting on Saoirse's bed that night, I felt like the whole world had shrunk to the two of us, her lit by the flickering blue gaslight, her fingers still against my lips.

So of course I broke the spell. I couldn't let it sit there. I'm always doing that. Talking. I tried to ask about her family, but I did it like a joke.

I said, "I suppose your father isn't really the King of Elfland, is he?"

Saoirse dropped her hand and sat back. She smiled, and there's no way to describe one of Saorise's little mysterious smiles. I thought she wasn't going to answer me. But as she climbed down from the bed to put the brush away, she said over her shoulder. "Of course he's not the king."

[Theme music; credits]

