

## Saoirse

**ELLEN:** You won't have seen it, probably, but there's a livery stable behind ma's shop. The window from our room looks out over it. It's shaped like a letter "U," and between the legs of the "U," out back of the stables, there's a little patch of grass where they let the horses graze a couple of times a day. It's the only piece of green you can see from our room. The only patch of grass within six blocks, until you get to the park. Emma hates the stables because in the summer the street smells like horseshit, and since Sinead broke one of our windowpanes we can't keep the flies out.

But I love looking down at that little patch of grass. If you sit on the little bed I share with Roisin, you can look directly down at that patch of grass in the back, and if it's the right time of day, you can see the horses standing at the fence, twitching their ears and swishing their tails. People passing by stop and scratch their ears or pat their noses. Some of the street kids will bring them oats they've pinched from a grocer's. Most of the horses are old-timers, used to being rented out, used to having just a tiny piece of pasture in the middle of the city. I don't know if they're happy, but they're content, if you see what I mean. Or resigned, but that's the same thing, after a while. Glad to get a scratch or a pat, fine with life in the stables.

But there's one horse, a little black filly with a white star on her nose, who isn't content. When they put out to graze, she never stands waiting for a passerby to pet her. She paces the fence the whole time, trotting with her head and tail up. Sometimes she'll kick her back legs up, two or three times in a row, and when she does that, you can see all this energy, all this power, just penned up inside her. She's about to burst with it, and there's nowhere for it to go. If

somebody took down part of the fence in the back, most of the horses would stay right where they are. But not that little filly. She'd be gone.

I told all this to ma one time. I was wiping down the counter in the shop, and she was putting out some old ink bottles on the shelves by the door. I told her that horse was my favorite, because she had so much spirit.

Ma grunted and said, "A horse like that can't ever be rented out. They need to break her. And if they can't break her, they need to put her down."

See you can't talk to ma about philosophy. She's too practical. But, Father, I'll tell you this plain: that horse breaks my heart.

**[Theme music; opening credits]**

Of course I've always known about the faeries. Ma may be practical, but she's full of stories from the old country. I've heard that some tell those tales to their children for bedtime stories, and those parents must really hate their children. They're all terrifying. The faeries are a dangerous lot, if you believe the old tales. They're forever stealing your children or spoiling your crops or leading you to your death if you're unwary. Everybody in every one of those stories is unwary, all day every day, so most times somebody ends up dead. Unless you're clever. If you're clever you can outsmart the faerie at its own game, and then you get the gold or the girl or the glory. You can keep the troll talking until the sun comes up and he turns to stone. But mostly, you die. I think for ma, she uses those stories as a way to get through life. She's always trying to outsmart the world at its own game, and she thinks that's the only way to make your way.

The scariest stories for me, though, were the ones about faeries who looked one way but turned out to be another. A man finds a beautiful woman in the forest, but when he embraces her, she's all hollow in back, not a real woman at all. Or she's a selkie, and as soon as she finds her true skin, she leaves him to pine away forever. Men are always pining in those old stories. Or she's a mermaid, and wants to drown him. Or she's a vampire. Those always scared me when I was little. The idea that things weren't what they looked like. That you could think you knew someone really well, but they weren't what you thought at all. They were ma's favorite stories.

And of course, they're all about how a man wants to own a woman and he gets disappointed. They're all about how you can't trust women, that we're deceitful and false. That we're dangerous. But I never felt dangerous. I felt scared.

And when I'd get scared, when the stories made me afraid to look under the bed at night, Ma would laugh at me and tell me to grow up. "It's all just nonsense," she'd say. "There's no faeries, and there's no magic, not for people like you and me!" Just stories, she'd say. Faerie tales. You understand what I'm saying, don't you? You're a teller of stories, too.

As Dr. DeQuincey led me up the stairs he told me the names of the others. There were four sections of the house, each one its own little apartment, with a front room where the customers would come to see the denizen, and then a couple of rooms where they lived. My charge was upstairs on the right. Across from her was O'Donald, a Scottish man the doctor warned me to stay away from. "He prefers to be alone," is what he said. Downstairs, in what I had assumed was the parlor but which was apparently also an exhibition room, lived an Irish woman named Deirdre, who Dr. DeQuincey said was "quite sad, but harmless." Across the hall from her, in the apartment below my charge, was someone called Mr. Clutch. Dr. DeQuincey only gave me his name, so I didn't know anything else.

They sounded like normal folks, boarders rather than freaks, and I asked the doctor what made people want to pay to see them. But by then we had reached the top of the stairs and he didn't answer me.

The landing was hung with tapestries, with pictures of faeries woven into them. Little kid's faeries, all wings and blonde light. Not the ones Ma told about. There were two doors off the landing, one on either end. Dr. DeQuincey led me to the one on the right. It was a big oak door, and in the center, about a third of the way down from the top, was an engraved brass plate. The engraving was in this flowery writing that was hard to make out, but I could read it. It said "The King of Elfland's Daughter."

Dr. DeQuincey stopped, just for a minute, and looked back at me. He had this odd little half-smile on his face, like he wanted to know how I was reacting. So I smiled back. I still wasn't sure how to act with him. And then he turned the knob, threw the door open, and stepped aside so I could go in first.

The room was dim--the sun seemed to have finally gone down--but the gaslight was enough to see everything pretty clear. It was as nice as the downstairs parlor. Nicer, even. The whole room was done in greens and blues, and the walls and ceiling was hung with silks and scarves so the light threw shadows across the room, dappled like we were under the trees in the park. It seemed to be a sitting room, but the furniture was arranged oddly. There were three chairs and a sofa arranged in a semi-circle with their backs to the door, all facing the wall opposite. In the center of that wall, facing all the other furniture, was a tiny chair, half the size of a normal chair.

The couch and the regular sized chairs were empty, waiting, like at any moment people would file into the room and take their places. I felt that really strong, a feeling of expectation. Like the whole room was holding its breath.

But I'm talking around it. Around the thing that mattered most. Except for that feeling of waiting, which disappeared the moment I stepped into the room, I didn't notice any of this until later, if you see what I mean. Because that tiny chair, the one facing me as I walked in, wasn't empty. There was someone sitting there, and when I came in the room that someone looked up and saw me. And when she saw me she stood up.

She was the tiniest creature that could be imagined. I would later learn that she was thirty and one-half inches tall, but at that moment all I knew was that, small as I was, she didn't reach my waist. She was wrapped in what I suppose was a robe, a blue linen cloth shot through with gold thread. It covered her neck to foot, so I couldn't see much of her except her height and her face. Her hair was long and dark, not my flat chestnut, but a pure black that looked thick and deep. Her face was smooth and pale, with high cheekbones and thin arched brows. Her eyes were so green they looked painted.

She looked like a tall woman seen at the end of a long gallery, or through one of the telescopes they have on the battery walk by the sea. Like she was far away, even though she was right there. Tiny as she was, and she was so terribly tiny, she had the bearing of a queen.

She looked directly at me as I came in, and it was like she could see everything there was to see about me. I felt my face grow hot, though I had nothing to be embarrassed about. I felt undressed when she looked at me. Dr. DeQuincey had said she was younger than me, but my first thought was that I had never felt so much a child, so...I don't even know the word. Like I didn't know anything. Like I was some naive fresh off the boat.

Dr. DeQuincey came in behind me, and said, "Oh, my dear, you are not dressed! Your public will arrive at any moment! Go! Prepare yourself!"

When he spoke, the tiny girl turned her eyes from me and looked at him. Her face changed, oh, so subtly. She lifted her chin, and even though she was only a little taller than his knee, it seemed like she was looking down at him. A small crease appeared between her brows, very slight, but I saw it. She looked back at me, just for second, though I felt it like electricity, and then she turned and walked through a curtained doorway off to the left.

That's when I realized I had been thinking of mirrors. While she was standing still, part of me was waiting for the trick. I knew Dr. DeQuincey was a showman, and even for all of his talk about "real wonders," the smart part of my brain figured there was some piece of stagecraft involved. Because she couldn't be real. Even though most of me was completely charmed, completely sold on the illusion, I knew it had to be a trick.

But her walking away couldn't be a trick. She walked right in front of me and passed through a curtain, and no mirror could make that happen. Whatever this "King of Elfland's Daughter" was, she was the size she looked.

I couldn't breathe, watching her walk past me.

"Don't stand idle, Miss Sheridan," said Dr. DeQuincey. "Close your mouth and follow her. You are her personal maidservant. Help her prepare."

My mouth was *not* open. But I did shake myself back to myself, if you see what I mean, and I followed the tiny creature through the door. The room on the other side was dimmer, lit by two lamps with a dusky bluish light. All the furniture in this room was tiny, sized not for you and me but for the King of Elfland's Daughter, who stood in front of a doll-sized vanity combing her hair.

Her robe lay on the floor behind her. She was wearing a simple shift, but made of silk, blue like the light in the room. Her shoulders were the same smooth white as her face. A beautiful

gown lay over the chair beside her, as fine as any the high-class women wear to the opera. As I watched, she began putting her hair up, twisting it into elaborate spirals and braids. I stood there, watching, fascinated, until she startled me by speaking.

"You are to be my attendant?" she asked. I suppose I expected some sort of high, childlike voice. A Punch-and-Judy squeak. But her voice was rich and musical, lower than mine.

I jumped. Up to now the whole thing had seemed like a show, something I was watching but not part of. But of course I wasn't an audience. I was part of the play. I curtsied and said, "Yes, ma'am. I'm Ellen."

She said, "Hand me that pin, Ellen." And she gestured at the vanity table.

I knelt down beside her and found the hairpin, a carved wooden piece shaped like a branch with new spring leaves. I handed it to her, and she pushed it through her knotted braids.

"I am Saoirse," she said. "Hand me my dress."

I was able to get through my first task without looking a fool. I had never worn a fancy dress like the one I helped her put on, but it wasn't hard to understand. She wore no corset--she was tiny enough!--and the dress was easy to figure out. She was mostly quiet as I worked, and I couldn't tell if she thought about me at all. She seemed quite used to having someone else do for her. Kneeling next to her, we were almost level, her forehead being just even with my eyes. It took only a few minutes and she was ready.

The dress was blue silk, with little jewels worked into the collar and wrists. Leg o' mutton sleeves and a tulip skirt with a trailing hem. It was the prettiest thing I had ever seen. *She* was the prettiest thing I had ever seen. She turned from the mirror and went to the curtained doorway again. I started to follow but she stopped me.

"You stay here," she said. Just that. And then the curtain dropped between us and I was alone in the little dollhouse room. I waited. I don't know how long. I leaned against the wall (there was no chair I could fit in) and I waited for Saoirse.

You might think that's more than enough excitement for my day. It had only been a couple of hours since I had the fight with ma and run away from the shop. And maybe I was thinking about that fight, alone in Saoirse's room, when I heard something outside.

There was only one window, and it looked out on the side of the house. There was a gravel path between Dr. DeQuincey's place and the house next door, which was hidden away behind a tall hedge. Standing on the gravel just below the window was an old woman. I'm used to beggars and vagabonds--they're the people ma prefers to spend time with. This woman was a breed apart. She was ancient, her face lined and creased like an old letter folded and folded again. She was wrapped in filthy rags, tattered and hanging off her and she wore an odd rounded cap, and strands of dirty gray hair snaked out from underneath it. She was leaning on a twisted stick, and looking up at the window.

She saw me see her. And she raised her stick, shaking it at me. Her voice was like a briar bush.

"Give her back," she said. "Give me back what you've stolen!"

**[Theme music; end credits]**

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