

Apple Trees and Wytches

The door slammed and I slipped my phone behind the cushion, I didn't want an hour long lecture from my daughter, particularly as I'd had a super busy day and my head was a bit fuzzy. I needn't have worried, she came running into the room all excited about today's visit from the wytch. I think it's a very stupid name and conveys entirely the wrong impression but, I suppose, that's the point. So many people want to denigrate the micro-communities. Well, I did myself until my daughter started volunteering on one and she'd changed so completely that I couldn't help but be grateful. I didn't care if they worked with the moon, wytches or even the English. My little joke, but in all seriousness I didn't know what would have happened if it hadn't been for them. Two years ago my very loving and happy daughter, Sasha, turned into a wraith with the darkest of dark circles under her eyes, all twisted with anxiety. I probably began to look very similar as I tried everything to allay her fears and bring her back to herself. I think it started with her father telling her about the prospect of starvation in a near future. That may sound cruel but he works for the Global Food Security program and he was just answering her questions. Sometime later, and it must have been a good six months, there was news of the first food shortages reaching Scotland. It was just things like rice to begin with and certain vegetables that you wouldn't miss if you mostly lived on pizza and pasta, which she did. But it was on the news seemingly every day and soon she wouldn't stop talking about it. Her father tried to reassure her but he was away so often it was hardly worth him being here at all.

"Mum, you're not listening!"

"I was. You were just about to tell me about the - er- wytches potion."

"It's not a potion, it's a preparation that increases the soil fertility. It's actually very scientific."

Scientific? Sweetheart. She wouldn't know scientific if it came up and bit her on the bum. But who cared? Looking at her in that moment I couldn't be happier. Her hair was thick and glossy and tied in a messy ponytail. Her cheeks were a healthy pink and her eyes were shining with excitement. Ok, she was still very thin, but three months ago she was edging towards death.

She crashed down onto the sofa and threw her skinny arms around me.

"Don't cry, Mum. Everything's ok."

"Yes, I know, love." I cried even harder.

"She also told us about the apple trees."

"Really?" And suddenly, I saw an image of my imaginary friend.

That sounds very silly, I know, and I'm a rational person. My heart gave a little blip and I tried to shake it away.

"I'll make you a cup of tea." She jumped up and was away to the kitchen.

I breathed out slowly as I saw myself, as a child, sitting in the apple tree. I would disappear there whenever I got a chance. It was where my "friend" lived and I used to tell her everything. Of course, it couldn't actually be true but I remembered her swinging from a branch and telling me her name.

I pulled out my phone and started a search for imaginary friends to see if remembering them in adulthood was a thing.

"Mum, you're such an addict." Sasha frowned, standing in the doorway with my tea. "And you know they're bad for you. All that radiation. You'll get cancer."

Strange how mobiles had become the new bad thing, just like cigarettes were in the past, and just as addictive. I put it down and asked her what she actually thought of the wytch.

"She was really nice, Mum, just like an ordinary farmer and not weird at all. They told me she was normal but I didn't believe them cos all my friends at school said wytches were weird."

"Well, it's a silly name. Too many connotations and who believes in witches these days."

"They should though because, in a way, what she does is like magic. She talks to the nature spirits to find out what is needed for each piece of land she visits. I know you think that's nonsense and maybe it is but something is definitely working. They didn't get rot this year on any of their crops."

I knew how important that was for her so I smiled and sipped my tea (peppermint, as caffeine was a "no no", very 2020's according to Sasha). Although, of course it was vitally important for everybody and soon the rest of the country were going to have to acknowledge the success of the Micro-communities. In fact, I'd written a glowing, somewhat redacted, but accurate, piece about Gerrick, where Sasha volunteered, and sent it to the environment minister as well as the Green Party leader. It was time the Scottish Government put serious funding into these extraordinary projects. They were currently still patting themselves on the back for, supposedly, reaching their 2030 zero carbon goal as though nothing else was important. I wasn't sure how to deal with the nature spirit angle, thus the redaction, but possibly it could be labelled religion and left there.

Sasha bounced out of the room to have a shower and I sent more silent thanks to Gerrick and the miracle they had achieved. My little girl had been so weak when she started she'd sat

between vegetables beds and done minute amounts of weeding. Now she was learning about tree pruning. I'd always been an academic and initially felt guilty taking her out of school but she was learning real skills for the future of our country. And the world.

I found my mind sliding back to the apple tree and my imaginary friend. I could remember her singing a little song that made perfect sense to me at the time. How quaint.

"I suppose it's quite ordinary to have these imaginations as a child. Something to do with brain development, most likely. I wonder if I'll remember her name?"

"Mum?" Sasha was leaning against the doorframe, wrapped in both a towel and a robe. "Who are you talking to?"

"Oh, just to myself."

"About me?"

"No, love, it's something I remembered when you told me about the wytch. Doesn't she have a proper name, I don't like using that term?"

Yes, Suzy. What did you remember?"

"I used to sit up in an apple tree when I was a girl. It was my happy place."

"Suzy says that they tend to be friendly trees. We can bring somebody with us tomorrow. Will you come? We're having a kind of thank you with cake and stuff."

I was pleased to be asked. I'd mostly kept away as I felt it was Sasha's place and she didn't need me there, getting in the way. But I was dying to meet this Suzy even if she was ordinary which I thought unlikely. Of course, I said yes.

So the next day we arrived at Gerrick together. On bicycles, as these days we are only allowed to use cars when absolutely necessary. Fortunately, "necessary" is still up to our own discretion. At first, I was a little disappointed with Suzy because, as Sasha had said, she was ordinary. No bright red hair, dangly earrings and flashing eyes. Just short dark hair, jeans and a check shirt. She was quietly spoken and seemed rather shy but the really astonishing thing was when she started speaking about the nature spirits. There I was, one of the most skeptical people I know, hanging on her every word ready to believe. So perhaps she does have some kind of magic.

After her little talk we all sat under the apple trees and ate the most delicious cake (which apparently contained neither wheat nor sugar) and then sang a sweet little song to the trees. In the middle of the song I happened to look up and there was the imaginary friend from my childhood swinging in the tree and singing along.