

THE GIRL



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The Girl

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The girl slipped on her black leather shoes, fastening the buckle on each strap, and straightened the little pewter skull on each one. Standing, she flattened the front of her plaid skirt with the palms of her hands and looked in the mirror. Her long black hair was neatly parted with bangs partly covering her deep brown eyes. She sighed and frowned at her reflection. The girl was pretty but didn't recognize it. She appeared to be about 18 years old, but had the odd experience of a body maturing much faster than her carefree spirit. She felt as if she were still a young girl rather than a young woman entering adulthood. She left the small apartment without eating breakfast, locking the green wooden door with a brass key, and waved to the black and white cat who sat just inside the window watching her go. She carried with her a copy of James Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to read on the train ride. As she waited on the platform, she shyly kept her eyes lowered to her shoes lest she attract any attention. She stepped forward as the train approached the platform, a wallflower not seen by the man behind her with a cart bearing two large leather-bound trunks. He bumped into her back with the cart, jolting her forward off the platform where she quietly disappeared beneath the oncoming train before anyone noticed. The girl held her eyes tightly closed as the train roared by, just overhead. It squealed slowly to a stop and she listened to the sounds of passengers disembarking and boarding, much too petrified to call out for help in more than a whisper. When the train had departed and it was once again quiet, she peeked from one eye, then sat up, coming face to face with a snarling white beast with pointed red ears. It was a huge hound, whose fur shimmered with an unearthly gleam. It bared its teeth and began to part its massive jaws and stalk slowly forward toward her. The girl panicked and tried to scoot backward before realizing she seemed

to be stuck hovering a few inches above the tracks. After flailing wildly for a brief moment, she noticed a blood stained black leather shoe and a familiar figure. She reluctantly tore her attention away from the jaws of death just long enough to make out a pale face with depthless brown eyes. In her shock, she didn't see the white flash that swallowed her up. Everything just went black. Time seemed dysfunctional somehow or nonexistent. She sat trembling in the darkness for what could have been a few moments or an eternity. She gathered at this point that perhaps she had died under the train and bemoaned her fate, lost in the infinite darkness. But when all hope seemed lost, when she thought she might go insane from the void, a flash of light appeared and she found herself hurled to the ground at the feet of a pale, blue-eyed woman of surreal beauty, who spoke with a voice like the finest silk. "Rise, young one. Do not be afraid." The girl did as she was asked, but was nonetheless afraid. "Do you know where you are, young one?" the woman asked. The girl quickly shook her head indicating that she did not know. The woman smiled warmly in a way that seemed juxtaposed against her somehow cold appearance. "I think you do," the woman said kindly. "But you will understand more soon," she explained. "Come with me, young one. You may ride upon my back and I will guide you to your fate." A white mist began to rise from the ground, swirling around the woman's feet, slowly rising and obscuring her flowing blue dress. As it swallowed her face, the woman's voice called out, "You are braver than you know, Aderyn Tywyll!" With that she was gone. In her stead stood a doe as gleaming white as the hound that sat next to her. The girl hesitated and the doe bowed her head low, beckoning to the girl to embark on her journey. The girl approached the doe who got on bended knee to allow for the girl to sit upon her back. The girl nervously obliged and the

doe stood tall again. The pair, trailed by the great hound, set off toward the misty green hills in the distance. As they traveled, the fog began to envelop them, becoming ever more dense, until nothing was visible beyond the soft white ether. After some time, the fog began to thin and the mists parted, giving way to an emerald dreamscape of moss covered boulders and groves of knarled, ancient oak trees. Within the trees the girl spied what appeared to be an iridescent glass structure, which seemed to be their destination. She watched in awe as the towering structure grew before her as they approached. Beneath the glass, the doe once again stood on bended knee, allowing the girl to slip softly to her feet. The girl had never seen such glass before. It was like living mother of pearl. She reached out to stroke the glass but the woman abruptly appeared next to her. "Aderyn Tywyll, I am Gwynnevar Margen, the Phantom Queen of Annwn," she said with a pleasant trill of the tongue on each letter. "You have been the killer and the killed throughout time immemorial; the abuser and the abused across innumerable intersecting timelines; the charitable and the greedy; the wretched and the kind. These many things you have done to yourself, oblivious of yourself and your true nature each time. This is the Hall of Acquirement, where you will meet the Council and gain true insight and true understanding of yourself. Here you will know fate." The girl swallowed nervously, her eyes searching the face of the Hall of Acquirement. "Enter and when you return, I will be waiting." Gwynnevar raised her hand and the mist rose up from the ground, parting a doorway into the Hall of Acquirement. The girl, called Aderyn Tywyll, passed into the structure and was gone. She met the mysterious Council and the experience left her spirit transformed. She was gasping and sobbing, her eyes now crystal blue and her hair platinum white. She appeared younger now as well; as young as

she had always felt in life. Despite her youthful visage, she now radiated confidence intermingled with her innate innocence. "Heddwch i ti, Aderyn Tywyll," one of the Elders whispered as they faded from her sight in the same swirling mist that she had witnessed consume Gwynnevar. With that, she found herself standing alone in a deep, dark wood; utterly silent, save for the distant screech of a hawk high overhead. Aderyn Tywyll was no longer confused; no longer afraid. However, she felt a creeping bit of her old timidity when twigs began to snap in the darkness, beyond her vision. She scrutinized the inscrutable until she could make out several faint forms, shimmering even in the darkness. It was not just one great hound, but a whole pack of them, encircling her. The sight instilled fear in her. It wasn't an anxious panic as she had felt in life, but an experience of archaic terror. Aderyn Tywyll began to run blindly through the dark wood, inciting the hounds to break ranks and give chase. Faster and faster she ran until she could muster no more strength; no more speed. But the hounds were still rapidly gaining on her. She closed her eyes and willed herself to move faster; to somehow escape. Suddenly she felt lighter on her feet than she ever had before and the wind on her face told her she was moving much faster now. Aderyn Tywyll opened her eyes and the landscape around her was blurred. She leaned back and suddenly darted upward into the treetops. She had become a small, darkly colored bird! The startling realization caused her to flutter for a moment and lose speed, so she landed on a long, twisting branch and examined herself. As she sat on the branch in wonder, a faint light split the darkness below her on the forest floor. Looking down, Aderyn Tywyll realized that it wasn't actually a light at all, but the glimmer of the white doe. The hounds bayed eerily and ominously at the treetops. The doe clicked her tongue and they all fell silent.

After shifting back into the form of Gwynnevar, she called to Aderyn Tywyll. "The Cwn Annwn instill dread in all who witness them, such is their power. But they are under our control and this is how we hunt. You are to lead. Come, and I will teach you the ways of the hunt. Come, death omen of Gwyn ap Nudd, King of the Fair Folk!" Aderyn Tywyll dropped down from the branch on which she was perched and clumsily shifted her form, landing hard on the ground next to Gwynnevar. The Queen smiled endearingly as a mother at her child. "Death omen?" Aderyn Tywyll inquired. "A death omen," Gwynnevar explained, "heralds the coming of the Cwn Annwn." She gave a sweeping gesture with her hand toward the white hounds. "A death omen guides the Cwn Annwn in their search for a soul. You, Aderyn Tywyll, are that guide. You were always meant to be. This is your fate." "It sounds as if I don't exactly have a choice," Aderyn Tywyll muttered. "Oh, but there is always a choice, my dear. Whether you prefer one outcome over another is an entirely different story," Gwynnevar stated matter-of-factly, then gave a sly smile. The Queen's smile hinted that there was more than she was letting on and Aderyn Tywyll suddenly felt the uneasiness of quarry. "And if I decline?" she asked cautiously. Gwynnevar's cold blue eyes pierced Aderyn Tywyll. "Listen well and save yourself hardship. You have met with the Council. You are aware that to deny one's fate is the gravest of mistakes. At best, the Council asks the Fates to recast your die and you return to the land of the living. At worst, you are rejected by the universe and taken by the Shy, who inhabit the void between universes. But most likely you would be expelled from Annwn and relegated to the league of lost souls. This is a path of insufferable depravity where you are haunted by your own fears and regrets. The experience is eclipsed only by that of meeting the Council or being taken by the Shy. Spending even a

moment existing in such a state is a true crucible. This is not punishment for insolence, however. This is merely the path of experience that must be trod to arrive at home, for all roads lead home." "Even for those taken by the Shy?" asked Aderyn Tywyll. "At the end of time," Gwynnevar explained, "when the multiverse breaks down and there is no more void between universes, yes, they are reunited with all that truly is, the source, the consciousness you'd call God." Aderyn Tywyll's eyes unfocused as she felt these paths touch her imagination. Even such minor contact made her feel hollow and she frowned. "Well if it's my duty to help the unfortunate cross over, then I won't shrink from that responsibility!" Aderyn Tywyll announced triumphantly, almost defiantly. "It is more than a duty to merely serve as a psychopomp, but your attitude is most admirable," replied the Queen. "You are an instrument of the very Fates themselves." "What do I have to do, Queen?" Aderyn Tywyll chirped. Gwynnevar talked at length to Aderyn Tywyll about the nature of the hunt. "In a spiritual sense, everyone and everything is connected. Every person, every place, every thing has its own resonance that is unique to itself. If you know the name, you can feel the connection easily and clearly. Hold that impression in your mind and lead the way. You will know exactly where to go." "Forgive me, Queen, but you can't do such a thing?" "I can to some extent. But such is the sensitive nature of a death omen. In addition, when you travel in flight, the inhabitants of this world and the physical can see and hear you and take heed. In a sense, you will have a physical body when you shift. I on the other hand do not cross planes when I transform." Aderyn Tywyll faltered the first few times she attempted to transform, then unsteadily took flight. She darted upward into the sunshine and stretched her wings. She felt infinite. The two traveled together, frequently tracking souls until a time which Aderyn Tywyll

was no longer a novice at the practice, and Gwynnevar broke their routine. "I have a most honored task for you. You are, in fact, to bring someone home from the league of lost souls," she said seemingly out of the blue. Aderyn Tywyll gulped. "Do not fear this domain, for it exists only in the minds of those who wander." "Oh. I was picturing hellfire and demons," laughed Aderyn Tywyll. "That is not to say that what you think of as demons do not exist. Though they are not what you believe. Remember, the universe exists in balance and they serve an ordained purpose. But be wary of any being you meet who is not of the Tribe of the Fair Folk. There are many who play tricks and others you simply do not want to cross. Lady Grassi is an example of this. In her negligence, she failed to close a fairy well one night and caused a lake to form. This interrupted a nearby fairy ball and, as a result, she was turned into a swan on the lake for six score years; until everyone she loved had died. But I digress. Byddar a Dall. What does that name conjure for you?" "It..." stammered Aderyn Tywyll. "It feels...familiar," she finished. "Byddar a Dall perished many ages ago and has wandered, lost since that time." The girl closed her eyes and whispered the name to herself "Byddar a Dall. Byddar a Dall." "Clear your mind and focus on the impression," Gwynnevar instructed. "I feel him quite strongly now!" exclaimed Aderyn Tywyll. "Good," said Gwynnevar. "Fly to him. When you see him, sing for the Cwn Annwn and they will follow your birdsong." Away she flew, following the pull of an invisible cord between herself and Byddar a Dall. She flew to a hilltop overlooking the sea and spied a man standing listlessly despite the picturesque scenery. Aderyn Tywyll alighted atop a dead tree next to the faintly visible foundation of a long forgotten cottage and she began to sing. "Hark! Who sings so beautifully for a tired old man?" said Byddar a Dall, who sensed the birdsong and turned around. "I remember not

the last time I heard something until this wonderful sound penetrated my veil. And lo! My vision has returned. You there, little darkly colored bird. From whence have you come?" Aderyn Tywyll fluttered down to a low branch and became the young girl once again. The man walked over to her. "Where's your head?" Aderyn Tywyll quizzed, for his soul stopped at the neck. The neck was billowing smoke from which the man's voice emanated. "The story is a long and bleak one, of which I have forgotten a great many details. I know I was not a good man but I remember my beautiful son sat here in the inglenook and was cast upon the blazing hearth. My wife, fair and comely, was defiled before me. My head was then taken from my body to a place I know not where. But I cannot enter peacefully into Annwn, for my heart is heavy and yearns for vengeance. I fear of falling into the domain of lost souls because of this. Perhaps I already have. I have known only suffering at a length I know not how long." "Well, everyone finds peace and forgiveness eventually," Aderyn Tywyll started. "Letting go and setting yourself free from pain is the hardest thing that can be expected from anyone. You've done it now. But it doesn't come without judgement. Though not from the Fates, not from the Council, nor from God, but from yourself. You'll see yourself completely exposed before all of creation. It's horrifying and it's glorious all at once. But I can only imagine how it feels to be lost. Where do you think you've been all this time anyway?" "This I do not know," sighed the man. "The domain of lost souls is as real as any other place but it doesn't have a special location," Aderyn Tywyll explained cheerily. "It's wherever you are. It's a state of mind; a self-made prison of regret. You've long known only fear and anger; deaf and blind and lacking wholeness of self. Does this not sound like the stories of the league?" "In fact, it does," Byddar a Dall answered. "It is as I feared all the while. How I

longed to be gobbled up by the Cwn Annwn to end my plight.” “I was scared of the Cwn Annwn at first,” said Aderyn Tywyll. “Really frightened. I tried to run away even. But, I've realized that to not see the hounds means you're left alone and forgotten. It means instead of going to see the Council you've been abandoned to wander. That's the hallmark of the domain of lost souls. Your head mighta been taken from you,” Aderyn Tywyll continued, “but in life, your soul can only be damaged by yourself and yourself alone. The same can be said of becoming whole under the guidance of the Council. Your head's not gone, silly. You only believe it is.” “Alas, I stand in need of solace. I do not know how to help myself,” the man admitted sadly. “I am afraid I am stuck in this state.” Aderyn Tywyll chided the man's hopelessness. “Everything you have in life is borrowed. Even your head. You've held onto it so tightly for so long, you've forgotten everything else. You've forgotten yourself. But that doesn't mean it has to be forever even if it feels that way. Hours are slow but years are fast. Time is not absolute. In fact, it doesn't even exist. There's just causation that feels endless when you're in it, although once it's passed you feel like it was only a moment. This is because time as it is experienced is circuitous and flows backward at the same rate it flows forward in order to maintain balance. You experience and unexperience things simultaneously. It's hard to believe because you can't have a memory of unexperiencing something. The memory becomes unwritten. But many people will sometimes spontaneously access their timeless soul knowledge and that's what déjà vu is. You've experienced something and unexperienced it leaving no physical memory, and when you re-experience it, you have a faint impression of it already happening. It's an infinite process that a lost soul becomes trapped in when they can't move on from physical life. But, you've finally

managed to step outside this duality of before and after. You've set yourself free! The Fates have dictated so and the Council awaits your arrival." "The Fates have called my name?" the man asked incredulously. "Aye," confirmed Aderyn Tywyll. An almost imperceptible sound of galloping steadily rose to a thunderous chorus. "Don't be afraid," Aderyn Tywyll reassured Byddar a Dall. He raised his smokey semblance of a head toward the sky and outstretched his arms to his sides, welcoming the onslaught. The Cwn Annwn crested the hill like a tidal wave that smashed into Byddar a Dall and washed him away. The torrent passed beneath Aderyn Tywyll and he was gone. A stag wandered languidly behind the pack, stopping beneath Aderyn Tywyll. It hazily shifted into a large scruffy man with a yawning rack of pearly antlers. The space around his eyes had been blackened with ash, as had been the tines of his antlers. He spoke with authority in a deep but cheerful voice. "Greetings, Aderyn Tywyll! I am Gwyn ap Nudd, King of the Fair Folk; Master of the Hunt and of these lands. I have a task for you. Find for me, if you will, the one called Tylluan Lwyd." Away she flew until she came to a house in the city. She knew she would have to wait because there were many people coming and going from the house. Knowing by now that the living no longer paid attention to omens, she decided to avoid if she could any mishaps with the Cwn Annwn in such close quarters. The people stayed for some time, but eventually they all finally left, leaving plenty of space for the Cwn Annwn to enter the house unimpeded and Aderyn Tywyll began to sing.

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