

*Helen Gilbert*

## **The Husking**

*This is the hymn they gurgle in their throats, but cannot sing in words that truly sound.*

— Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*

She arrives at the boatshed just before dusk, the pumpkin in one hand and a pair of long green gloves dangling from the other. The ferryman is just leaving the far shore and she figures that she'll have plenty of time to dress before he reaches her, so she pulls out the black cape from her knapsack and buttons it around her shoulders, then reaches for the hat, frowning briefly to find it slightly crushed, the tip of its cone bent and the brim crooked in places. But it keeps her hair from her eyes while she smooths her face into a mask of white paste and then etches it with red lipstick and thick dark vertical lines drawn down over each eye to pierce her cheeks.

"Now all you need is the broomstick," she says to her watery image as she focusses her attention on the river.

"Or maybe a poisoned apple or two," the image replies.

She laughs and then sits under a tree on the bank, cutting a striking, though not altogether odd, figure in the late October chill amid a flaming landscape of maple and birch which burns cleaner with each fall day.

The ferryman seems to be dawdling, but she doesn't mind in the least. It's easy to be patient in a foreign language with a man you know will never know you. And she's good at molding emotions to fit the words she's mastered, the ones she can pronounce perfectly, the ones that translate without those traces of difference which allude to a world she does not

understand. So she waits, hands sifting idly among the fallen leaves. Through the river's lens, she watches the sun sink into an ice hot cauldron.

Across the water, on the island's flat land, the bonfires have already been kindled and she can discern several figures backlit by jagged heat. Her blood rises with a half-remembered childhood as she thinks of bushfires, her tongue thickening with eucalyptus ash, burnt flesh, smoldering corn

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The ferryman hums to himself as he ties up the boat. His eyes register no surprise at seeing a witch waiting to board. He pockets her fare and then steers the bow deftly through a narrow channel in the reeds. When open water slaps lightly against the gunwales, he maintains his course with one hand and turns to watch the woman, his breath spiralling across her eyes drowning in the black water. As he looks at her, the ferryman thinks of a loon calling across the marshes. He waits for her to say something.

It doesn't take long to get to the island at this point. Further up the Gaspé Peninsula the St. Lawrence yawns into an immense gulf where its waters turn back on themselves, folding and breaking, but here the river sucks arctic winds gently into eddies and the boat trip is smooth throughout. And silent.

After they dock, she stands hesitantly on the shore, watching the flickering fires.

"Salut! Vous rêvez?"

She turns quickly, starting at the figure at her elbow. He's wearing a wonderful black spangled dress with a thick shawl and carries a rather long wand. A crown perches precariously on his tight curls.

"Let me guess . . . the fairy godmother—*la bonne fée*," she fumbles for something to say.

"Non, *la fée Carabosse*."

"Of course, the good fairy would be in virginal white."

He smiles enigmatically.

She has no idea whether he understood her or not.

"Pourquoi le potiron?" he asks.

"The pumpkin? I like the color; it matches my gloves."

He smiles again, white teeth flashing, then leads her toward the house, their path lit by the fires. As they walk, the figures she saw in silhouette from the boatshed materialize as elves, gnomes, wizards, goblins. She is surprised to realize that some of them are children.

Two small ghosts come running up with their hands out.

"Donnez-moi quelque chose ou je vous joue un tour," they chant in unison.

She looks at them blankly. Somehow you never expect children to have mastered a language that still trips on your tongue, that falters between the thought and the sound, or the sound and its image.

"Trick or treat," the fairy nudges her, producing some candy from a false breast.

She hasn't brought anything so she smiles weakly.

The ghosts keep chanting, more insistently now, their disguises giving them licence to menace. A few gremlins join in, blocking the path. They sense they have power over her, this voiceless witch with the limp hat. She feels it too, but she steps forward, the fear laughing in her throat.

He scares me sometimes. Me big brother I mean. He's got a real bad temper an' when he lets fly his face goes all red like it was gonna bust. Then he yells louder than Uncle Frank an' that's sayin' somethin'. Uncle Frank lives about a mile down the road. He's always havin' fights with Auntie Dot an' you can hear 'em from here. Dad tells us not ta listen 'cause he reckons the air's blue with four letter words, but that don't worry me. I hear plenty right here when Mum an' me sisters go ta town an' everyone else forgets I'm around. I know lotsa other words too. More than me big brother even. He stopped goin' ta school ages ago. Now he calls me a smarty pants 'cause even though I'm only little I'm never stuck for somethin' ta say. I read books about places all over the world, an' I practice big words like perpendicular or some of them foreign words like parlay voo fransays, all the time, an' when he gets really mad at me an' starts yellin' fit to kill, I just put me fingers in me ears an' say those words over 'n' over.

The children's words echo in her ears as she reaches the house which is packed with more grotesque forms. Some revel in the music, some grope each other in quiet corners, while others chat animatedly, pretending not to notice. She wonders how you tell who is who and if it really makes much difference.

The fairy gets her a drink and introduces her to a few of the others. She strikes up a conversation with a dragon but their words get tangled up in the crossfire and he starts fondling his tail and leering at a group of sprites, so she takes her cue and wanders off outside, drawn by the smell of food to

one of the smaller fires where someone has set up a pig on a spit and a huge tub of water for the corn.

"You've been here for three months and you still won't speak French," she grimaces to her image in the tub.

"Go back to your nice safe university," the image grins back, flames licking its face.

I've got a scar on me face where I came a buster off Trigger but I'm not scared of horses an' I don't cry when I fall off. Most of the time, anyhow. I've been ridin' me own horse ta school since I was in kinda an' I'm countin' how many times I fall 'cause Dad says you gotta reach a hundred before you're a good rider. I made sixty three last week when Trigger dumped me in the mudpool. I guess he was mad at me for makin' him jump all those logs. Me brother'd kill me if he knew. I'm not allowed ta jump anymore 'cause the doctor cost five pounds or somethin' like that when I cut me face open. Me brother carried me home. Dad was on the plonk again so he wasn't much use an' me brother had ta drive the truck ta town an' I was bleedin' all over the seat. Blood doesn't worry me, but. Sometimes I get Dad's razor an' cut little slits in me fingers. I like it when the blood comes out in big round drops.

She wants to speak volumes, to bleed words into the air like nectar oozing from a cut stem, but she can't trust her mouth because she never knows what's going to come out of it until it's too late. So she sips wine to loosen the vocal chords and melt the crystals of cold night air on her breath.

The air bubbles with children while masked figures come and go in the firelight. They are mostly men, shades dancing in the margins of her mind, leaping around the flames with blood-curdling yells that redouble as the children scream back in fearful delight. Emboldened by the wine, she talks to some of them, the sentences coming slowly at first, then more freely as she builds up a rhythm until words sizzle on her breath, making small hissing sounds like pig juice dripping onto hot coals. It helps that she can't see their faces.

I use'ta go all the time an' lock up the poddies with me big brother but now I stay home when I can even though I hate peelin' veggies. Feedin' chooks is even worse. Mum asked me why I swapped jobs an' I had ta lie 'cause she'd kill me if she knew the real reason an' I'd never be able ta look

her in the face again. Anyway, me brother told me not ta tell anyone an' I bet he'd get real mad if I did. An' Mum thinks the sun shines out of his bum, that's what me sister says anyway, an' he'd never let her see what he's really like. Sometimes Mum makes me help him with the poddies, but I don't go near the shed any more if I can help it. I'm always scared he's gonna bolt the door then I won't be able ta get away. I use'ta go there a lot. At the back there's heaps of corn piled up right ta the window. I use'ta pretend I was Rapunzel an' the corn was me hair only it went from the ground up to the window an' not the other way round. Or sometimes it was the Yellow River of China, or Sinbad's Treasure. You know, if you kinda half shut your eyes an' look at corn when the sun's shinin' on it, you can see rainbows, an' it looks almost like real gold, or near enough if you got a good imagination. Mum reckons I got a real beauty an' I reckon she must be right 'cause I can see the man in the moon, an' the man that hides behind the tree near our toilet at night, an' lotsa other things that no one else sees around here.

The corn roast has begun. She chooses a plump ear and pulls off the silky brown beard first, then the husks, one by one, until the grain is fully exposed. Gathering up the pile of husks, she flings them deep in the fire where they burn into papery cinders. Then she pierces her cob with a roasting fork and looks for faces of men in the flames as it cooks.

The other day he got me in the corn shed again only this time I got really scared an' started to yell so he called me a bitch an' let me go. I knew I shouldn't'a gone in there in the first place but I couldn't catch Trigger an' he told me ta go an' get some corn to make him come. Anyway, then he came in behind me an' bolted the door like he did before only this time he looked like he meant business. When I said I was gonna be sick he picked up his whip. I started ta yell an' then he threw it down an' kicked me outside an' started breathin' loud. I shoulda just run home then, but I'm always wantin' ta know what's goin on so I found a nice crack in the door an' watched him. Lucky he took off his pants. As it was, he made a real mess all over the corn cobs. I sure as hell wouldn't wanna be the horses eatin' that stuff.

She butters her corn, sprinkling on salt and pepper, her teeth bared for the first bite.

I've tried climbin' out the window, but goin' up the pile's a dead waste of time. When you get near the top the grains always spill everywhere an' suddenly you're back where you started. Anyway, it's not much use tryin' ta run away. An' it doesn't really hurt—not if you don't fight an' if you don't count the spewin' up. I spew up all the time anyway. Mum reckons I've got a nervous condition, whatever that is, but that's crap. I just do it ta make everyone sit up an' take notice for a change. An' nothin' makes em' take more notice than vomit all over the place.

The corn hits the ground in yellow splatters as her stomach pulses its thick fluid into her throat, rejecting the wine and the food and the grey smoke and the farm smells. She moves further into the shadow, hoping no-one will notice her, finds a log and sits down, drinking in air to cool her stomach. Then a satyr comes up and asks if she's okay. She puts on a face to meet the mask she meets, finding the words to brush him off but not the tone. Language is like music—if you don't start in the right key, you're lost. So the satyr sits down and asks her where she's from, why she's here, who she is. And because she is already lost, she tells him more than he is able to know.

I'm makin' me first holy communion next week. I had ta go ta confession first 'cause the nuns say your soul's gotta be clean an' white an' that the devil gets impure little girls. I wasn't gonna tell the priest about me brother until they said that. I read all about the devil, an' the river—Sticks or whatever it is, an' the ferryman, an' I don't wanna be stuck there. Only person I ever heard got outa there was that prince who stole three golden hairs from the devil's chin an' he had a kind ole woman ta help him. Anyway, so I told Father Kenny I sinned against the sixth commandment 'cause it didn't sound quite so bad sayin' it that way. I was scared shit he was gonna open the window ta see who it was confessin' somethin' like that, but he never said nothin', just kept on prayin' an' never missed a beat. An' he only gave me three hail mary's for penance. That's nothin'. Anyway, I said six, just in case the devil was watchin'.

She hardly notices that the satyr says nothing, his face inscrutable behind the mask, while she cuts the air with her talk, the alcohol still singing in her veins, tuning the words, smoothing out an occasional stutter, honing the sounds to a fine pitch so that only a trace of discomfort remains, the odd

dissonant beat in a symphony of words that translates her life, transforms it into sounds that are beautiful because they render foreign what is contemptible in the familiar, freeing her from old echoes as she speaks about her childhood in a foreign language because it seems easier, because it's less personal, because she can say the word that corresponds to "I" and it never quite means the same thing, and so she tells him about her country, about the farm, about her family, about her passion for horses and the words she used to practice when she wanted to shut out the world, and finally about her big brother and the corn shed.

I know I said I was never goin' near the corn shed again but me big brother was real nice ta me for days an' he even promised ta give me a good horse ta learn jumpin' at the pony club. An' he took me out ridin' an' never got mad an' never touched me neither. I figured God musta listened ta me prayers for once, 'cause everythin' was goin' real good. But then he got me in the shed an' went an' wrecked things again. This time it really hurt, but I still didn't cry even though I nearly busted a gut tryin' not ta bawl out loud. After he let me go I got mad as hell an' said I hated him, an' I was gonna tell on him. I didn't really mean it, but. I thought he'd belt me one for sayin' that but he just went all red an' reckoned he was real sorry. Then he went an' got out his pocket knife an' asked me ta cut him so he wouldn't wanna hurt me ever again.

She's on her fifth glass of wine when the smell of hot dung sears the air and the satyr leaps on her, pushing her down into the darkness with his frenzied weight, one hand sliding under her cape and up her sweatshirt, the other fumbling with the zip of her jeans until her skin burns with metal and she thrusts herself away from his sour breath and cloven hooves, feeling the smoke burning in her brain, watching the children watching her, fighting against gravity, against his goat-beard rasping on her skin, and most of all against her body, falling . . .

I dunno why I did it. I guess it was the devil makin' me fall outa god's good books like Eve in them bible stories. Dad was at the pub again an' everyone else was sleepin' an' I just took a whole box of matches over there an' got a bunch of husks an' lit 'em. Just like that. Anyhow, the wood caught fire an' everythin' started burnin' real quick an' it went all red an' hot just like hell must be. I only just got outa there in time 'cause I was too

busy watchin' the fire an' seein' all kinds of animals an' people in there. Fires are like that—your eyes get glued to 'em if you're not careful an' even when they've died right down you never know how much they're burnin' on the inside, or when they're gonna start right up again an' nearly blind you.

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In the log's hidden core, in its smoldering eye, the heat still glows from the ashes of Halloween on the island in the middle of the river where the ferryman waits. It is one of those crystal clear autumn mornings when you could drink the sky. Inside the house, human debris litters the floor. But the witch with the green pumpkin does not sleep like the others. She is leaving for the ferry, for the city, for the minutiae of her daily life. The wicked fairy guides her down the path and they talk about the party. She tells him how she spoke French for hours, how good it felt, how she almost believed she was a sorcerer poised at the edge of magic until . . .

"Qu'est-ce qui s'est passé?" he says, noticing the blood on her glove.

"Nothing . . . only I tripped over a satyr and it made my mouth bleed."

"Satyre! Il n'y a pas de satyre. Vous rêvez."

"No, I didn't dream it. There was one there. I . . . talked to him for quite a long time."

"No." He reverts to English to emphasize the sound. "You're definitely mistaken."

She fixes her eyes on the feilds of hoarfrost, laughing away the taste of fetid corn on a blackened tongue, and continues towards the dock where the ferryman waits.

I'm waitin' for Dad ta come home an' I'm sure not lookin' forward to it 'cause mum says I'm gonna get the beltin' of me life. She reckons he'll be specially mad 'cause all the trees near the shed got backened an' it nearly started a bushfire. You could still see it smokin' this mornin'. I don't reckon it'll hurt much, but—the beltin' that is—'cause Dad never stays cranky for long. An' anyway, I got some leaves ta stuff in my pants so you can't feel it. I learnt that trick from readin' about Blinky Bill. I can't do that on Mum, but. She knows about that kinda stuff an' she's always threatenin' ta send me ta boardin' school when I do somethin' bad. But I'm not scared. Ann of Green Gables went ta boardin' school an' she met lotsa nice people there.



When I grow up I'm goin' ta Canada 'cause it sounds pretty good over there an' I'm gonna learn ta talk French 'cause if you know foreign words you can say secrets out loud, only they're still secret 'cause no one else can understand you, an' you won't get into trouble for sayin' bad things. I might even go an' see what the north pole's like. I heard you can see colored lights an' rainbows in the sky at night time there, an' I read all about the reindeers an' the snow queen, an' I wanna see how white snow is, an' if the cold really hurts bad, an' what it feels like if you get one of those ice splinters stuck in your heart.