

BÉARRA

by Jane Harrington

I

It is the Spanish Sea that laps at the strands of the peninsula, that claws at the cliff faces, that is written on the maps. Yes, Spain is the closest ally of those who descended from those who took to their curraghs or clasped onto wreckage and washed up on Éire's shore.

An eon has passed or an hour (this is how my da put it, so do I now) since that watery escape, the sinking of a continent, and here is a lonely chieftain, his cattle threatened by raiders. It is the crime of the era, stealing each other's milk. That and sawing through trunks.

He wishes to take to the sea and gather a fighting force, but his one ship has been sunk, and all others in port are the moaning ships, pulling always at their tethers. They are built by the raiders from oaks-turned-staves, bones of the trees they cart down the mountains.

They don't ask the trees for permission before slicing them up, you see, and that is why the ships moan. That is why the raiders are doomed. Not this minute, maybe not for a thousand minutes, but they are. You need a blessing before you take bones. You just do.

The chieftain wants to build a new ship of oak hewn with respect, but the raiders are thick in the derries, clearing fast and faster and fastest, now making great ossein castles that creak in the Atlantean gusts. These castles are doomed, too, as doomed as the moaning ships.

But, lo, a whale has swept ashore and won't leave with the ebb. Before it draws its last breath of air (on water these giants drown, one of the things my da told me that I was so certain could not be true) the whale sets its one open eye on the chieftain and winks.

In no time he has scraped out the corse and made of its ribs a sound vessel, and he soon arrives in Spain to rally an infantry to come to his aid. And then—because he is lonely, remember—he finds a special friend, a woman, to join him in his unctuous boat.

They sail, aglow in their chamber, where touch is a moment and touch is a lifetime and touch is for ever. And when they reach home, they climb to a

plateau, and the chieftain names all he can see for her: Béarra. (Yes, this is the person, the place, for which I was named.)

Their love is as soft as the pasture they stand on. (“Like it was with your mam and me,” my da would say at this point in the story. And though he was a man who could kill, he could also cry like a baby. Áine and I would soothe him till his moaning and creaking ceased.)

From the meadow where the two clasp hands, the new chieftess sees field after field of the trees’ torn limbs, and this pains her. Her mate points past them, *Look there*, he says, to the far west coast, to beaches like lace, to islands like breasts swelling in cerulean folds.

One island in particular has off its shore a boulder believed to be a sleeping heifer awakened only in famines, to fly over the peninsula and rain sustenance onto the hungry. The chieftain tells his new wife this—though he himself doubts its truth—and that assuages her sadness.

So he goes on with the story, speaks of a smith, a colossus, whose forge was the island and the heifer his. *Was that his home?* she asks of a castle perched on a cliff. No, he answers, *it is just now built*, and he leads her away so she doesn’t hear the wind moving through it.

Skip forward—say, a year and a day, if you like—when the couple lay prone in their cairn, crowns pointed to the sunrise on solstice. Arriving are new raiders, these not human but wild boars and stoats, who will tear at flesh and trap in bones the descendants of Béarra.

(Even as a child I understood these beasts to be symbols, insisted to Áine that she not take our da seriously, that wild boars cannot wear helmets of steel, that stoats cannot be galloglasses. But as with the way of a whale's breathing, I would, in the end, see for myself.)

The battle is vicious, stoats pouncing four at a time, each biting into an arm or a leg. They pull as one *On the count of three!* until all that remains is a convulsing torso, then a road of torsos, then a channel full of torsos washing up on that island that was once a giant's forge.

And there is that castle, where hidden are those who don't fight, those most prized of the Béarra: her pregnant women, her girls in braids, her boys with tiny bows tensed and aimed when the wild boars clatter in to have their fun, the lesser stoats made to wait, mouths watering.

Afterward (and no measure of time can be assigned to *that*, my da had said, and this I did believe, this from the start) the stoats are charged with chaining them in pairs, some stoats first taking their turns at what they've been denied, and pushing them off the cliff.

What the stoats don't notice—they aren't so smart, the stoats—is that there are no splashes. They also haven't noticed that the boulder has sprung again its wings and has flown to the strand under the cliff and now stands on all fours, catching the ravaged as they fall two-by-two.

When the giant's heifer has taken them far enough away, has passed over the stone circle and the holy well and the clootie tree and the standing stone and the fairy rath and the iron mine and the cairn, they look behind at the now flaming castle. That, too, for the last time.

They find other survivors, some not torn apart, and they leave the peninsula on a march to seek help in the East and the North. But the trek is arduous, and many stop and settle where there are no signs of the wild boar, no ruptures from horns in the sheaths of the trees.

The very next second in one of these places lives a family in a hut of mud and thatch, a pig in a pen. Promising roots, their star flowers now closed, grow plump under beds built like steps in the hills. On pastures beyond are the townland's sheep, nibbling soft grasses.

From the porch of this hut the family can see the citadel—all in Cashel can see the citadel—its round tower and spired cathedral built into the Rock, its

fortified walls meant to hold them all in if invaders come, whether they be ogres or tyrants or biblical beasts.

The father now sets down on this porch a cage of twigs, having made it for an injured linnet his daughter, just three, has found. The girl loves this bird, wants to share it with her sister, but she is but a days-old baby and cares only to purr at her mother's nipple, eyes closed.

What is that? the parents ask each other with a glance. They've never heard the sound of leeches inching their way. It's primal, though, flight is. The girl bellows on her father's shoulder, to the cage left behind. The bouncing baby roots in vain, eyes now open to the day.

He didn't believe in the creed, this father, he had never worshipped in the cathedral built into the Rock. So when they push through the doors, alongside those who carry turnips and cabbages or babies of their own, it is the mother who knows where to hide, her he follows.

(It was not the origin of the Rock of Cashel that had kept my da from the faith, the claim that the massive boulder had blown from Satan's nearby mountain lair on the occasion of his banishment. No, my da would never take issue with a good story. His gripe was with Patrick, his effect on the Gael. Sure, Patrick had been a prophet willing to compromise—Brigid got sainthood, Puck stayed at

the fair—but he also got things done. He exiled to myth the Tuatha Dé Danann, the Aos Sí, the Fianna. He diluted the well. That’s how my da put it.)

Keep moving! the father cries when the mother pauses at the font and dips a hand. It is one of the rules, you see, to never pass the holy water without doing this. She taps out the trinity with fingertips against her head, heart, and shoulders as she rushes to the statue.

Mary is the one she has chosen, not John the baptist or Raphael the archangel. It is the virgin mother who will protect her children, and so, shushing, they scurry behind her, careful not to touch her limestone robe, the locks down her back, the cold serpent at her feet.

It is mayhem, but of a quiet sort, the denizens of Cashel not wanting to be heard and not wanting to miss any scritch or scratch on the rubble outside. They fill every shadow, the space under pews and in crypts, and when they are all in, those hundreds of beings, they wait in fear.

Up the Rock of Cashel the firebrands ascend, legions of them crawling out of a grassy ridge, once the domain of the fairies, and latching onto the granite with their posterior suckers, their heads swaying and then clutching too at the rock, pushing and pulling along.

Up-down-up-down-up-down-up the crags they scoot, until the brigade of leeches is on the wall of the citadel, then scritch-scratching the rubble, then push-pulling their segmented bodies up the sides of the cathedral and down over the sills and into the umbrage, to prey.

Opening wide their tripartite mouths and revealing barbarous blades, they inject their coagulant poison, and they saw and siphon till sated. Then with a snap they unlatch their jaws and slither off, leaving behind tripartite circles in flesh, lifeblood pouring onto the floor.

They have no ears, are unhindered by howls. Their five pairs of eyes are blind to agony. And so it is they glide gleefully into the crypts, slide with ecstasy under the pews. Now coated in red, they leave trails where they go—on a baptist's bare feet, on an archangel's wings.

The finest-dressed leech, in thigh boots of leather, looks down on the mass from the chapel's altar. With a tasseled spear, and a high leech-scream, he points to those not yet punctured, those dozens still kneeling, hands flattened to pray or holding each other's.

They all now abandon their nooks and their sanctums, splash through blood, dodge bodies five deep. It's the bell tower they seek, its massive oak door with its hinges of iron. Soldiers pursue, but they lag in the chase, having taken to walls now, for leeches can't swim.

Thank you, Mary! the mother is crying to heaven, her family kept safe in the effigy's folds. She runs now, is pulled up the stairs with the flock, pauses only to genuflect when the great door is barred. The father, he even bends knee this time, but that to the door—it's moaning.

An hour goes by, an hour of keening, and the soldiers grow restless and hungry again. The leech-lord straightens his pure white collar, then delivers an oath from the pulpit. It fills the apse, reaches the tower: *Surrender now, and your lives will be saved. This, in God's name.*

No matter the enmity, no matter the hatred, no matter their differences, they all share the same God, don't they? This is what they are thinking as they flow down the stairs. At the bottom they take a collective last breath and unbar that door never blessed by its maker.

The ambush is joined by a special guard, hanging, swaying from the lintel and ready to strike. They haven't mouth-blades but proboscises, which lance the chosen as they cross the threshold. Their victims they clasp and spear, then toss into the wine-red flood.

Those left in the stairwell turn to run; *A window*, one shouts, *is our only hope!* The father—his armload now frantic—reaches for his wife behind him on the stony

stair. But instead of her hand, she gives him the infant, the daughter who is not even a week from the womb.

Go! she mewls as she drops to the step. *We'll carry you!* he cries, yet they are now alone, and his wailing children are all he can hold. *I love you too much, I can't leave,* he bleats. But the terror in her eyes, cast from daughter to daughter to darkened door, tells him he must.

So they are not there when the proboscis goes through her, when she flows down the aisle and cascades down the Rock. They don't see her slip neath the ridge, under grasses, where the Aos Sí once reveled, where their bewitching music made all Cashel smile in their sleep.

They do not, either, jump from that bell tower window (though Áine preferred to tell it this way, complete with a fairy host catching us in air), for the father soon sees there is no use at all, the others lying ruined in the rubble below. He finds a dark niche, weeps and waits.

It is as babel up there, the father and daughters shrieking when the soldiers arrive in the belfry. But the leeches hear not human anguish, remember, and so they miss the three in their shadow. After slithering to the window and peering down at the dead, they descend again.

For some time, the father remains in his perch by the bells—the iron of which will soon be melted and turned to cannons—listening to the bedlam beneath. When silence finally fills the air around them, he gathers his charges, too hungry to cry now, limp in his arms.

He winds back down the slick steps to the cruciform church, the carnage. The vaults are all plundered, the organ in pieces, and no statue has been spared the swing of the cudgel: stone heads stare as wide-eyed as those of the mortals suspended with their cabbages.

There's a clink, and he freezes, sees the leech-lord standing on the communion table with a chalice in hand. He rants to the corpse-filled pews: *I'm your bishop now!* Staggering, he aims to fill the cup with piss, but teeters and falls to the altar, and doesn't rise.

The wind seems the only force with empathy on this day, taking the smoke in an easterly direction while what's left of the family fades west. Looking behind to the cathedral-turned-pyre, the father commits now to Patrick, vowing to protect all that's not yet been lost.

The day ends with the threesome in a sheepfold, the infant fed from the teat of a ewe, the others (my da and I) from foraged hazels and haws. Rain hits the thatch, the children fall deeply into sleep, and the father thinks, *Tomorrow, we start the work of getting her back.*

II

It was westward, always, against the winds that we moved, around shapeless mounds once the birthplaces of chieftains, up and down shorn hillocks, ever passing or joining our fellow countrymen, they too clawing at withered landscapes now unable to feed us.

By the time the last bard's neck was snapped, I was nine years. Long gone were the ancient books, the brehons, the fili, the druids—the vestiges of a learned people had been turned to mendicants. It was Oliver Cromwell's run that had brought the Gael to his knees.

But my da rejected the choices now offered to us by the “Lord Protector”: To live in barren Connacht or to live in Hell. He chose, instead, to destroy the Cromwellian, those interlopers who, for their services in the defiling of Éire, were given her lands for plantation.

They built mansions, walled in game, patrolled crops and pastures, populated every watchtower. “Easy targets,” my da would say of them dismissively, and “We'll get her back”—his last line, no matter where he happened to leave off in the telling of our story.

In the days when he was still carrying at least one of us in his arms, he never got the story past our porch in Cashel. He'd stop with me trilling at my little bird

and my sister cooing over warm milk. It was one of the ways he kept our mam there, moving along with us.

“You have her dark tresses, come down from the Spanish princess,” he might say to Áine while braiding her hair; or when helping me dress, “She, too, favored blue, her dye from the ink of a mollusk she kept secret. *Shh! It’s bad luck!* she’d scold whenever I talked of it.”

He choked less and less on the memories, told us more and more about why we lived like travelers, why we dug through ashen fields, why we slept in wreckages of toppled homes or under rock shelves. Why we knocked at the door of any hut we could find.

We would always be let in, no matter how small the place or crowded. It was the rule to be welcoming, from time eternal. A crone on the doorstep could be a fairy monarch, and your refusal to give entrance a curse that could turn your children to changelings.

In the huts, food was shared, and lyric, and melody, and tapping heels and toes on the clay. And there was talk of where to poach for the next day’s meal, what weapons had been hidden where for the party going out in the night to hunt the Cromwellian, reduce his numbers.

For visitors, too, fresh rushes were strewn, so when eyelids got droopy, we'd line up for sleep— girls, in age order, against the mud wall, then women, then boys, then men on the outside. Our one set of clothes would be hung by the fire, or laid over us if blankets were scarce.

There was no indecency in our nakedness; this needs to be said. Generations of reduced circumstances had made it commonplace to see another in the flesh, yes, even a stranger, but that lack of mystery regarding the human form did not equate to impropriety.

Nor did it bear on our passions. We fell in love with all the ardor of our ancestors who had had the luxury of privacy. By the time I was thirteen I knew this well. A boy's momentary glance as we passed one another on a boren could set my imagination on fire for days.

Just such a person, nameless even in my dreams, I'd had on my mind as I fell to sleep next to Áine that night of the pikes and torches. *Whores!* they'd yelled at us, chasing all the children from the hut. My hands flew to cover my breasts and genitals, shamed as Eve.

There was an old couple left in there, the other adults having gone on the raid. The two put up an awful fight from the sound of it. Finally, the torches reemerged, and in the blaze of the hut we could now see what was atop their pikes, all the heads, one of them our da's.

So we were on our own, Áine and I, sleeping in the bogs with other wanderers, knit close to keep the hoarfrost from growing on us. As our da had started doing in his last weeks, I ever reminded my sister, and myself, to be vigilant of the newest threat, the gathering-up.

This was the project of the son, Henry Cromwell, by this time Éire's "Major-General." He was in pursuit of "young Irish girls," as the warnings read, to send them off to populate the colonies. "For their own good," he'd been quoted as saying, so concerned for our welfare.

When we heard the clopping of horse hoofs in the countryside, we hid; when in the towns, we kept to the shadows of the shops. In one of those shadows, one day we met a woman with babe in arms, the bundle tucked warmly into her coat. She was like us, spoke Irish.

She told us where she was escaping to, she with her child. *I've seen that Béarra, the place you're named for, she said to me, and Montserrat is just like that, only sunny all day, fruit growing free. All you have to do is sign with an X,* she said. And so we signed with an X.

I'd been watching for kidnappers, see. I didn't know to watch for spirits. Not till we were in the carriage and the woman dropped her armload with a thud. I

gasped, then exhaled relief when I saw it was not a baby fallen from the blanket, but a gourd. Then I gasped again.

The ship was already crowded when we were put on. We recognized some of the political prisoners, friends of our da who had been caught, given death sentences now changed to transportation. Execution, all the same, but to be served slowly, in the cane fields.

There were some free-willers aboard, too, still of the belief that there were lands to be given them after their seven years of servitude, but mostly the cargo was girls my own age or older. Áine was among the youngest, which can explain her terror, her unraveling.

“Tell me again the story of my name,” she’d say, when we were let up on deck. We were, all of us, manacled in pairs at all times, and I gave thanks each night, on the stars we couldn’t see from our narrow shelf of a bunk, for my being chained to my sister, so I could guard her.

“Áine was queen of the Aos Sí, and the daughter of the sea god, Manannan Mac Lir,” I’d say, and she’d giggle just as she had when we used to roll down hills with children we found for a frolic, not realizing we were all lost, not knowing any better than to have fun.

“The feast of midsummer,” I’d go on, “was set out for Áine, the balefires lit in her honor, the fairies swimming through the sparks and smoke, their sweet enchantments filling the air.” She’d point there, and there, and there, into the ocean mist, claim to see them flitting about.

“Áine carried with her, like a rush-light, the summer sun,” I’d say, taking into my own her thin hands. “Áine brought the world its brightness.” And she’d lean on the rail, and smile at all the beautiful little beings she saw darting around her. “Tell us again,” she’d say.

When we could see the Montserrat harbor ahead, the ship dropped anchor, and we were unchained, given lye soap and hairbrushes, linen dresses to wear. Our merchant, *the Company of Royal Adventurers*, wanted to get the best price for our indentures.

Still we wore the leg irons issued by the ship’s smith those months before when we’d boarded, but now we were able to do things alone, like visit the stinkpot. Even then I kept close to Áine, protecting her, as the statue in the cathedral had. Or our mam’s belief in it.

It had been just such beliefs—in saints and sins—that had, all voyage, made our keepers so sure we wouldn’t throw ourselves into the sea. But, no, it was not fear for our mortal souls that deterred us. It was the being in pairs. No one wanted to make that call for another.

So it was like great raindrops when it started happening, one sad angel struggling to climb over the side, then another and another and another, the weight of the ankle irons pulling them swiftly beneath the glimmering skin of ocean, as if they were each made of marble.

Our *Royal Adventurers* pulled muskets and ordered around the carronades, but they quickly saw the folly of this. What sense was there in shooting the profits that remained? The guards instead swarmed the deck with ropes and chains and began tying us together again.

“Stay close, Áine!” I cried, reaching for her, even while I knew she was gone. Her fingertips casting light with each stroke, she was following Mac Lir, swimming to the Tír na nÓg, where the fairy host, eternally happy and forever young, were waiting to regale her.

III

My indenture was bought and the paper ripped by a Donald Egan-Smythe. This was after he had done his inspections—lifted my eyelids and lips, lifted my dress—and after his surgeon had determined that I was not at risk of spreading diseases, that I was a virgin.

The girls had been first up at the auction, so we were first to the pen to wait, first to feel the branding iron on our arms (even then, the least of our pain), to console each other before being parted, to watch as the rest of the cargo was paraded and paid for.

Lastly, the planters themselves offered their own goods: the indentured laborers they no longer needed but had yet time to serve; slaves they didn't want, including those born on their farms. Donald Egan-Smythe had a few of the latter to sell. He was a breeder.

His stud farm was a small operation, so there were only two of us he led into his cart that day. He'd bought a slave for 50 pounds sterling, ten times the price of my indenture. Africans were then still a rarity on Montserrat, so they were bartered like prize steers.

Though barely older than I, Benin was not new to bondage. This I could see, as he lay next to me, unable to sit, the buttocks being where males got the marks.

The array of initials burned into him seemed a macabre poesy in the making, the raw *DE* rising up now.

“Don’t let them see you cry,” he whispered, and I wept all the more, as he’d said it in Irish. I would soon discover that thousands upon thousands of us had been carried to the island from Éire, so her tongue was widely used. But Benin, he was as fluent as a Gael.

He’d come from a land of languages, spoke a handful by the time he was eight and thrown in a sack and taken into slavery. His duties on ships were given to him in Dutch by the traders, Carib by buccaneers; on the islands he gained English, French, Spanish, and Irish.

It was this gift in particular that made him both sought after and feared. The planters wanted him to teach English to house servants and to spy on the fomenters of the incessant uprisings. But no master dared keep him long, so certain he’d turn that cleverness back on them.

“They beat you harder when you cry,” he said, and I muffled my sobs for the rest of the ride, and covered my mouth as I alighted from the cart and onto the path, staying ahead of Egan-Smythe and his lash, my toes pressing into others’ footprints baked into the mud.

We were steered to a shack of sticks and plantain, and I was pushed through the door. I listened as Egan-Smythe and Benin spoke outside, words I couldn't yet understand. I scanned the gritty floor, dug in the sand until I found a broken shell and closed it in my fist.

When Benin came in—though I didn't yet know even his name—I was sitting with my knees pulled up to my chest, my arms closed around them. He looked over his shoulder, to Egan-Smythe's shadow cast long across the threshold, then he stepped closer to me.

I pushed the shell up between my thumb and the crook of my index finger, hidden and at the ready. "He'll leave once he thinks we're at it," he said. "If you can sound like you're in pain, all the better. You can yell whatever you want. He doesn't know a word of Irish."

He went to his knees next to me, then curled onto his side as he had in the cart. "He'll peek his head in, so we should be close." I stayed still but for the heaving of my shoulders with each sob. He held a finger to his lips. "Shh," he hushed, a pleading look on his face.

"Hail Mary," I said, my teeth clenched, "full of grace." *Louder*, Benin mouthed. So I raised my voice to the thatched ceiling, "Holy Mary, Mother of God," and raised it again with each line of the prayer until I was shouting, "Amen!" and the shadow across the door retreated.

We lay there together, stripes of bleached sun sprayed over us from the chinks in the rickety walls. I could hear waves splashing against rock, the squawking of sea birds and strange chirrups and whistles in strange trees. And then joining the chorus was Benin, weeping.

I dropped the shell, set a hand on his shoulder—our first touch, the only one that first night—and whispered, “I thought you said we weren’t to cry.” He spluttered through tears like a child’s (we were children, after all), “When they can’t hear you, that’s when to cry.”

He, like I, was named for the land of his ancestors: Benin, a kingdom in westernmost Africa, where his mother, too, wove cloth of blue—*her* secret a berry—in a place he would not go again but in his memories and in the stories he would tell his infant daughter.

Igbo was his people, and, like the Mandingo and Cormantine, a race of high interest to the likes of Egan-Smythe, whose fortunes were built on such stock, on the endeavor to create offspring of the ideal shade, with traits deemed more desirable than those of sire or dam.

In a line we lived, all of us on the farm, a shanty built into a swale between the big house and the sea. We tended the food crops and the children, mourned

when a child was lost at birth, but even more-so when one reached a mother's shoulder and was taken off in the cart.

“Life's worse in the sugar fields,” Benin told me, his gentle hands in the night moving down my growing belly. Holding him as he wept, I came to know his every scar, his back the canvas of a mad artist, one who used brushes of lancewood, cowhide, shoots of cane.

When Aisling was born, Benin was fascinated with her, whispered long in her ear in a language I couldn't comprehend, the Igbo with which his father had told him his stories—tales of their land that lived in only the one language, Benin said, not able to thrive in another.

One story he did try to translate for me, about a creator of all things. It lived on the sun and had its middle girded round with a belt so it didn't need food or drink. It smoked a pipe and governed all captivities and deaths. “It has no eternity to offer,” Benin said when I asked.

Benin also told me that he, too, had a sister he lost, thrown in the sack with him and sold as a sex slave for 100 core, a sum of white seashells. He gave, then, a sad look to Aisling, thinking, I'm sure, of the brothels along the harbor, the rough seamen who visited them.

We took to sleeping with our baby in a hammock made from vines and cotton hung in the branches of a kapok tree—a tree with a soul, the native islanders said. Up there, the wind took off the stench of the latrine, and our dreams were scented with jasmine.

Every day, in that, my first year of servitude, I ached for Ireland’s clime, the rain and mist, the softness that filled the skin. In Montserrat I’d witnessed but two kinds of weather: scorching heat and drenching downpours. And then there was the hurricane.

It came in the night and turned our swale to a rushing channel that swept into the sea all of our shacks and all those inside. Egan-Smythe ran from his house to try to save his fortune of flesh, but he, too, was pulled into the torrent, a force over which he couldn’t lord.

We were in the kapok, its branches wrapped like a colossal’s arms around us. That is the only way I can explain it, those hours with the air howling, pelting rain. We were safe in our cocoon of cotton and vines, held each other till the wind died and the dawn broke.

The house servants and mistresses were the only others left. No one survived from the shanties— not the woman ready to birth Benin’s second child, not the one large with the third. “Maybe they’re the lucky ones,” Benin said when we’d come down, his feet in the ebbing tide.

We gathered supplies from the house, then the others split up and left, a runaway's chances better if not in a group. Benin and I would be thought dead in the flood, so at least the slave-catchers, once their posses organized, wouldn't have in their pockets our descriptions.

We crept along the shore, the water pulling at our hips. A grassy-topped bluff loomed ahead, and when we reached it we climbed till we found a cave well above the tide line. There, perched over a lagoon where none but the whales watched us, we set to making a home.

A short climb above us, on the bluff, was a tangle of leggy banyan trees, and we found there wood for our cooking. From the cliff, we gathered fist-sized stones, and with them created a circle at the lip of the cave, a ledge that jutted out over the deep blue water.

We picked paw-paw, bananas and guava that grew wild. We caught what Benin called the mountain chicken but was really an enormous frog, and we dipped for fish in the tidal pools. We tried ever to trap a wild hog that lurked in the banyans, but it always eluded us.

The black and yellow oriole's *chuck-chuck-chuck* was the call of morning, violet and orange butterflies entertained with midday dances, the smell of nutmeg was

ever-present. We thrilled at watching the galliwasp and bats hunt for bugs. The air tasted of salt, of freedom.

But our life in the cave wasn't sustainable. Our smoke sent signals, we made noise, we left trails. And now Aisling, crawling, trying to stand, was ever at risk of tumbling off the ledge. "We need a plan," Benin said, looking out at the ship lanterns glowing on the horizon.

Whatever we did, we couldn't be caught. The iron gag would be clamped on, or we'd be flogged to near death or else executed in one of the many ways detailed in the laws, such as being nailed with hardwood pegs to the ground and then burned slowly from the toes up.

The plantation where he'd last been, that was the center of Benin's scheme. It was a major sugar works, with boiler houses and stills, hundreds of acres planted in cane and tobacco. Benin had been sold because the middleman suspected he was plotting a revolt. He was.

Gilbert Humphries was the name of the middleman, the same person who had practiced his whip-craft on Benin's back. He was methodical with his thirty lashes, sometimes melting wax into the cuts. The screams echoed for miles when the cloud cover was just so.

The plantation's master, Capt. August Day, was rarely there. He was a privateer who patrolled the Spanish- and French-held islands: Trinidad, the Windwards. As was the prevailing fear, Day thought those nations were coming to free the Irish and enlist them in an overthrow.

Harvest's end was when he could be expected to come through the gates of his estate, to inspect the yields. His ship would remain in the bay for weeks, the crew holed up in taverns. On the last night, he would put on a fancy ball for the other planters, serve food on gold plate.

It was in preparation for this homecoming that Benin began venturing out to the sugar fields during the busy months of reaping, when the great gang was all day and all night amidst canes twice their height, cutting tough stalks as thick as their wrists. They used machetes.

Benin headed out of the cave whenever he sniffed rain, melded with friends in the field during a cloudburst. There was an overseer he knew to be into the rum by noon bell; the disappearance of an occasional farm tool was not to be noticed by a man seeing double.

Eight machetes had been hidden between the rows of cane stumps by the time the Irish on the plantation were celebrating Beltane with a pig roast and August Day's carriage rumbled up his magnolia-lined lane, the creamy blossoms open for him like obedient hands.

Benin kept vigil the following weeks, waited for the crew to leave the brothels and begin ferrying provisions to the ship, preparing the tarry ropes and sails. The captain's gig, tied to the plantation pier since Day's arrival, was also readied, its benches polished.

The taking of the gig—that would be the hurdle, Benin had felt. There were only two oarsmen keeping guard, but overcoming them would be a disturbance, and there was no way of knowing where Gilbert Humphries or his henchmen were. Their ilk was not invited to the ball.

As for those on the ship, Benin knew the type—buccaneers and slaves—and there would be no love lost between them and the wealthy Capt. Day in his satin waistcoat. Benin would tell them right off that the ship was theirs. We wanted only to be dropped in Trinidad.

We could hear the music from the house, see the whale-oil glow of the windows. Those with machetes were in front, their families crouched behind in the brush. Benin gave a signal, and the weapon-wielders charged the gig, slashed the guards' necks, tossed them overboard.

We were all in the boat, oars ready. The bowline had been slipped and had splashed into the black water. And then somehow the rope was in Humphries'

hand, and in his other was a pistol. He raised it to the sky and took a shot, called his pack to the evening's sport.

The punishments were such that some would find their escape after all, their eyes not to see again the sun. When it was Benin's turn, hanged by his hands and waiting for Humphries, he looked to me, my bloody back curled, Aisling now quiet, sucking at my breast.

"I'm sorry!" he wept. Humphries approached him, his cutlass ready for its next emasculation, but then the middleman stopped and looked at Benin as if seeing a ghost. "I thought you'd drowned," he said, "with that breeder." And his head swiveled in my direction.

He held a torch near Aisling. "A *perfect* one," he said, his lips parting, sharp teeth gleaming. He told his men to take Benin to the holding pen at port before Day found out he'd come. A merchant from the Virginia colony was there, would pay Humphries good coin.

Benin's cries could be heard through the gag as they pulled him off. His yowling shook the kapoks and rose to the tops of the jagged mounts for which the island was named. The song of his distress brought even the sirens to tears as it sailed to the new world.

IV

AD was still a black crust on my arm when I came to realize that I would never be released. Even if my indenture hadn't been lost, the crime would have doubled it. I would still have been on the plantation a decade later, Aisling to my shoulder and picking tassels from cane stalks.

And Gilbert Humphries would still have been vexed by my not having a baby in all the years— neither from the slaves he ordered to lie with me (they left me alone) nor his own violations. He was impotent, not one of his clutch of mulatto prey ever bearing him a child.

“Biddy,” he squealed, creeping up from behind as I bent to snap the green shoot at the base of the stalk. I didn't flinch—Stoats can't rape humans, I said to myself, as I always did—when he pushed his forefoot up under my skirt and dug inside me with his claws.

“Good year for sugar, so lush,” he said, and I knew he was looking down the row at Aisling. He had been watching her daily, his scent glands emitting a stench as he leered, frustrated. He wasn't allowed the girls until Capt. Day broke them in, and harvest was still months off.

I'd been, of late, trying to work out our escape. We could get off the plantation, no problem. My years of submissiveness, as I'd calculated, had earned us lax

oversight. But I'd expected more time to craft the rest of the plot. Most girls weren't taken till after age twelve.

And then, there he was—Capt. August Day, on a rare visit in autumn. He clomped through the young canes, his horns protruding from his headful of bouncy curls. “Humphries!” he called, and he teased a lace-edged hanky from his sleeve and blew. “Where is the thing?”

The middleman pulled his paw from between my legs and pointed at Aisling. Day nodded, stroked his flared canines. “I can see why you're eager. That Egan-Smythe, God rest his soul, did good work. Shame the buck didn't survive.” He beckoned Aisling near with an *Ukb!*

She turned from her task of pruning the canes and crept down the row to us, then looked from brute to brute to me. “Do what they ask of you,” I told her, and she stared back, horrified, becoming a changeling right in front of me, innocent child to ancient crone.

Day yanked on the strap of her worn dress till it ripped. Then he pulled at the fabric and exposed one of her pubescent breasts, the nipple and areola having just begun to swell in the preceding months. As he pressed the pink flesh with his hoof a bulge grew in his linen pants.

I felt as if I would faint, so I held tight to the canes behind me and willed my face to stay the same one, the only one, I had ever shown them—emotionless, hard. “You’ll want her bathed,” I said. “I’ve made jasmine salts. I’ll wash her hair, have her to the house by last bell.”

“I like them dirty,” Humphries said, to which Day grunted. He fiddled with the pearl buttons of his blouse, stroked the coarse hairs that pushed through, “I prefer a fragrant whore.” Then he lumbered off, saying over his shoulder to me, “Last bell or *he’ll* come for her.”

But by last bell, we were in the cave, that place where we’d once tasted freedom. The fire circle had been untouched since we were there as a family, but now we picked up its stones and sewed them into our dresses. Then we stood against the rock face, stepped out on the lip.

A whale was the lone witness to our fall. It sunk with us, breathed last with us, plied with us moaning seas strewn with broken limbs and empty currachs. We clasped onto the creaking wreckage and let the surge take us off to the watery shores of Atlantis.

V

The fish nibbling at your skin, that is what wakes you, the herring and capelin and cod abrading what is sunbaked and beaten and tough, leaving your flesh as salty and soft as the brine that has carried you here. The shoals are almost too crowded to see past, but try—

There! a covey of mer-women with blue scales and dark tresses, and mer-children holding rush-lights, all swimming to the Tuatha Dé Danann, the Aos Sí, the Fianna. And there—see it? A humpback. It has come far, from an eastern shore, a fire crackling within its ribs.

“You got them back,” I say, all in bubbles, “just as I got her back.” And I swish my tail and tell you the end of the story: That the three of you sail for home, aglow in your chamber, where touch is a moment and touch is a lifetime and touch is forever.

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