

meadowyarn

the light inside

a #yarnfictions novella

by Anj Medhurst

part eight : shuck/meditation

Shuck

It has been here before and I've no doubt it will return. I remember that night, centuries past; the one they all still write about and sing about and tell their grandchildren about, even though none of them were there. I was there. I felt the giant claws sink into me, smelt the rancid coat, saw the devil eyes.

That night the storm raged, the air heavy, the pressure relentless. Creatures burrowed, or tunnelled, or climbed, seeking shelter. Everything that could hide, did. Then they were still; they knew that this force would wane, be spent – eventually.

How did they know? Even the tiniest insect, the most fleeting, transient of creatures, recognised that this danger would pass and they waited, patiently. You? You could not fight the terror, the fear, the belief that this was the end. You imagined it was here for you, this beast, this portent of doom. It manifested itself in you, a chameleon creature. A devil, a dog.

Meditation

I say goodbye to Scout and close the kitchen door. I know he'll be up on the sofa before I have even left the house but it seems scant reward for several hours confined to barracks, so I ignore it. I meet Bernie at the kissing gate and we head across the marsh towards the village. She'd called me over as I passed her house a few days ago to ask if I was planning to go to the concert in the church this evening.

'Well, I hadn't given it a thought, actually.' I'd admitted, a little shame-faced. Yet again, Bernie's cultural and local knowledge outstripping mine.

'Oh, you should. Really... you must. The ensemble is fabulous and it's a lovely

programme. You can imagine how wonderful the acoustics are under that huge vaulted roof.'

She is her usual exuberant self.

'Now, I am embarrassed.' I'd cringed as I'd continued, 'I must admit, I've never been inside the church.'

She rescues me from my embarrassment in her typically brusque manner.

'Well, that's no surprise, is it? Given it's locked most of the time. I'm not sure what the wardens are scared of, the marauding hordes of travellers and eastern Europeans pinching the silver I shouldn't wonder. Ridiculous. Anyway, that's even more reason to accompany this old soul on Saturday and hear some wonderful music. What do you say? Meet you by the gate at ten to six? Great, see you then. Bring a torch. Cheerio'

Bernie's unique combination of enthusiasm and no-nonsense pragmatism is, of course, not something I can argue with. As she'd headed off across the garden to her studio, sketchbook under her arm, clay dust coating her boots, I'd nodded and looked down at Scout.

'Don't get your hopes up, mate. You'll be staying at home.'

On Friday evening, Bernie and I stroll across the marsh in the golden light of the early summer evening, watching the rooks alight en masse from the trees behind Bernie's house and then resettle. It's a ritual they repeat every evening; a quest, I imagine, for the perfect night roost.

'They say if the rooks nest right at the top of the canopy we're in for a hot, dry summer; if they nest lower down it'll be wet and windy. What do you think? Will it be a scorcher?'

'Would you like it to be?' I have learned from my conversations with Alan that what might seem like perfectly delightful weather to my 'townie' sensibilities, is usually a disaster for one kind of crop, animal, or other.

'Well, it does make working in the studio a bit warm but yes, I do rather like the

Mediterranean climate. I travelled all around Spain and Italy before I married, you know. Life in an Andalusian village, wearing espadrilles and linen and eating oranges straight off the tree, I think I'd have quite enjoyed myself.'

We sit in the cool church, on hard wooden pews and listen to Debussy, Ravel and then to Massenet's 'Méditation from Thaïs'. On the printed programme it means nothing to me, but as the first notes rise into the vaulted roof I am back in mum's kitchen, her stirring the teapot, putting cups and saucers on her funny little oblong tea tray and humming this very piece of music. I think it must have been used in a film she loved, she always hummed film scores. It's a hauntingly beautiful piece and as the music fills the church I am on the verge of tears. I know mum would have enjoyed this concert but I can't picture her here, in this rural church, amongst this eclectic audience. Dot Killick would have held no truck with this leisurely passing of a summer evening, she'd have had ironing to do, or a cake to bake, or a neighbour who needed company.

The last notes fade into the lime-washed walls and ancient wooden beams and I think of all the lives that have been lived while this church has stood here, looking out over the estuary. When your job has been stripping back the human body to its mechanics, working out why it stopped working, the mystery of life, the pure unbelievable magic of it all, tends to get lost. I don't think I met a religious or spiritual pathologist in all my years working at the hospital mortuary but here, in this moment, I am quite prepared to believe that there is another dimension.

As the musicians take their final bow and the applause fades, Bernie turns to me and smiles. 'Enjoy?'

I pull myself back into this moment, from wherever it is that the music has temporarily taken me.

‘Oh, it was wonderful. And this space, it’s magical, thank you.’

‘Now,’ Bernie continues. ‘If you’ve never been inside the church before, you won’t have seen the devil’s fingerprints.’

As the audience shuffles towards the exit, pulling on jackets and finding car keys, she walks towards the wooden door on the opposite side of the church. It is probably nine or ten feet in height, arched, and furnished with iron studs and impressive hinges. Bernie points to what appears to be a series of scorch marks around shoulder height.

‘Imagine, it’s 1577 and the congregation is sheltering from a fierce storm when the door bursts open and a huge wild beast, a dog, a black dog – the black shuck – aflame, with glowing eyes, tears in, kills two men and maims a boy.’ She pauses. ‘An incarnation of the devil itself and these are the marks it left behind.’ She runs her fingers down one of the indentations in the wood.

I reach up to touch the skinny oval groove. The blackened wood is warm and smooth. It looks like a scorch mark or a burn, the surface charred. The edges are jagged but the middle is worn like it has been polished. These marks have been here for more than four hundred years.

‘The same Shuck that killed the art dealer that lived in your house in the war? That’s a very long-lived dog.’ I laugh and we stroll towards the exit with the last few concert-goers. Bernie hooks her hand through my elbow as we descend the steps outside the church.

‘When we turned the cowshed into my pottery studio, we replaced the old barn doors and salvaged the timber to make my workbench. It’s covered in grooves and scars, maybe they’re the marks of Black Shuck too.’ Bernie winks at me and we head off towards the marsh in the twilight. As we walk away from the church there are bats swooping above our heads in the fading light. I’d never seen a bat before I moved here and I am awed by their silent aerial display.

When we reach the gate, where we will go our separate ways, it is almost dark.

‘Listen...’ Bernie stops and waits. A tawny owl calls from somewhere in the trees, its simple ‘twit’ ringing out, then from across the meadow we hear a quavering ‘twoo’ in reply. A reassuring call, back and forth, to and fro.

I carry on alone across the meadow to my side gate and before my key is in the back-door lock, I can hear Scout’s tail thwacking against the floor, ready to welcome me. His greeting is exuberant and as I potter around in the kitchen; making tea, preparing supper, I realise how settled I feel here.

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