

The Lengthened Shadow of a Man is History

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by

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PRE-HISTORY

Forsaking the chieftain he fled -
through forest and mountain.

In mead halls he roistered and fed
for a season.

Until -
arrayed as god Frey when meeting his maiden,
in timid dawn's twilight
over the peat marshes striding,
with cart-wheels creaking,
they led him –
drew neck-rings, leathern,
tight at his throat
and laid him as sleeping,
bronze manikin beside him.

Green tints lit ash twigs -
trusting for harvests
or invoking a doom

MARJORIE'S STORY

The house was unimportant to Marjorie and, she disregarded any suggestions of haunting which attached to its name, Malbane Cottage. It was the garden that she loved. The very day she moved in she dumped her bags, boxes and cases in the living-room, went outside and started hacking back years of rampant undergrowth by the kitchen door. Some hours later she realised, with a jolt of relief and surprise, that for the whole afternoon she had forgotten her sadness. From then on, planning the garden and working in it became the central purpose in Marjorie's empty life.

So, while digging the heavy clay Marjorie could escape from the punishing memories which oppressed her. But at other times the flash-backs still struck - as sharp and intense as the events themselves. Time and again she felt the tearing labour pains; relived the hidden, squalid birth; saw the child stretched beside her ... waxy skin fluttering over a bird-thin rib-cage ... a tiny fist, stretching ... twitching ... motionless ...

When the rumours had started Marjorie had tried to face them down. But she had not been believed when she insisted that she would have cherished the fatherless child. Even after the acquittal and exoneration, doubts had remained. Banner headlines in the press had done their irrevocable damage. When whispers grew from tittle-tattle to shouted abuse, Marjorie shunned her few friends, concerned for their embarrassment, wanting to spare them the awkwardness of associating with her.

And so she had left the town and withdrawn first to a Wolds village, and then to this remote place on the margins of civilisation.

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The area was new to her, but the South Holderness archives told her that before the Romans had drained Lund Marl, a lake village had stood on the land surrounding her cottage. So it seemed appropriate to Marjorie that once her flower beds, vegetable plot, shrubbery and lawn were established, she should create a pond to complete her garden.

Digging out the pond took her some time, and the fragments of rubbish which she unearthed from the heavy soil - pottery shards, a bent buckle, the hasp of a knife – fascinated Marjorie. Somehow they seemed like coded messages, left, centuries ago by previous dwellers, whom she could easily believe had been solitary people, like herself.

One day in early October, clunk! her spade struck something she could not immediately identify. Made of metal, the object shone dully in the autumn light. Intrigued, Marjorie took it inside, washed the clay and mud off in the kitchen sink and examined it closely. Now clean it looked a bit like a doll. She felt the metal (iron? bronze?) heavy in the palm of her hand. The figure was lying on its side, knees drawn up a little, wrapped in a cloak, as if comfortably asleep. Surprisingly detailed, a skull-cap and toenails, and, yes, even eyelashes were plain to see and – what was that? A rope of some kind? Plaited around the sleeping figure's neck.

Marjorie felt a sudden tenderness for the modelled figure. His expression was so tranquil, peaceful. But the haltered neck? What did that signify? Criminal execution? Sacrifice? A scapegoat? It reminded her of something she had read about or a picture she had seen some years ago. Some Scandinavian bog burial or an archaeological find in an Irish peat marsh, was that it?

Tenderly, Marjorie stroked one finger along the curve of the figure's spine before setting him down carefully on the window-sill.

Tomorrow the morning sunlight would fall on him.

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‘He looks very settled, there,’ Marjorie thought, when she came in from the garden the next morning. It was almost as if he had stretched himself out more comfortably in his sleep, his knees touching the central latch of the Yorkshire sash window, his back along the edge of the sill. Once again, she caressed the figure, her finger tracing the curve of his spine.

Always slapdash in her house-keeping, it did not surprise Marjorie that evening, when she came in from the garden, to find that there was no clean pan to boil an egg in and no clean spoon to eat it with. Discarded food and utensils were overflowing from the sink and cluttering the draining-board. It was high time she did some washing-up.

Sloshing water around and scrubbing randomly at the encrusted remains of meals she had forgotten eating, Marjorie squirted Fairy liquid roughly in the direction of a particularly greasy pan and accidentally showered detergent over the recumbent figure on the window-sill.

For the fraction of a moment she could have sworn that she saw the model shiver like a dog shaking off water. She paused, plastic bottle in hand, and looked closely at the manikin. No. She must be imagining things. Or it had been a trick of the light. The sleeper lay still, knees drawn up, just as before.

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But was it just as before? Wasn't there something different about the little model? Last time she had run her finger along his spine the manikin had measured the same length as the hasp of the window. Now, surely, his toes were protruding further along the sill. And his head! His head was a full half inch closer to the right-hand end of the window frame.

Marjorie was not a fanciful woman. Phlegmatic, stolid, even, she tried to think of a rational explanation for what appeared to be happening. Perhaps the metal was expanding in the heat of the cottage. In the sunlight. After years, centuries maybe, of lying under a cold damp coverlet of alluvial mud. That must be it. She resumed her washing up but decided that she would keep a more watchful eye on the figure in future.

Which Marjorie did. For some days, like a bolting young plant, the figure steadily grew longer, with a corresponding thickening of torso and limbs. Then, the pace slowed down, until it stopped altogether and Marjorie persuaded herself that the calorific influence on the metal had abated and the model would expand no further. It seemed that she was right. The manikin, now measuring a fraction under fourteen inches, lay static on the windowsill, apparently unaffected by sunlight or shade.

The day the plastic membrane for the pool was delivered Marjorie spent an absorbed, even contented afternoon fitting it into place. As soon as she entered the kitchen, however, her mood changed. A shadow fell on the seed catalogues fanned across the table like a crumpled cloth, and it seemed to her that something or someone was watching as she kicked off her boots and dropped her gloves beside them.

She was about to greet the figure with the customary spine stroke when, in the dimness, she saw that the sleeping manikin had elongated himself so that the whole

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windowsill supported him like a trestle bed, his humped body blotting out some of the daylight.

‘Drat you!’ said Marjorie. ‘What are you up to? You’ll be falling off there if you don’t put a stop to this!’

Lifting the figure, which she noticed had become correspondingly heavier, she carried him across the kitchen and placed him on the seat of the Windsor chair standing beside the Rayburn. ‘You just stay there,’ she said. ‘Let’s have no more of this nonsense.’

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When she woke next morning Marjorie was irritated rather than surprised to see that the manikin had changed his position on the old chair. No longer lying flat along the seat he seemed to have shifted in his slumber, and was now resting against the slats of the chair back. His feet dangled some inches over the seat itself.

Of course! Realisation dawned on Marjorie. The Rayburn had glowed warm all night, and the constant heat had re-activated and intensified the metal’s response. For a moment she considered chucking out the troublesome statue with her rubbish, but, looking at his peaceful expression, she moved him instead to the flat stone slab of the pantry. It was cold in there and that should put a stop to his elongation, she thought, as she stomped off into the garden.

The weeds seemed particularly lush and tenacious that morning. Marjorie made slow progress. About mid-day, unusually weary, she noticed a child, a slight boy of

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maybe nine or ten, staring at her from the garden gate. She thought of asking him to help, offering him pocket money, but as she moved towards him the boy sidled away.

‘No!’ she called. ‘Stop a minute. Won’t you just ...?’

But he broke into a run. ‘No!’ he shouted, giving one quick glance over his shoulder. ‘No. You’ve nivver seen me. Me Mam said I weren’t to play by Malbane. I’m off,’ and he was gone, stomping over the marshy ground and lost to sight in no time.

Marjorie had little appetite for lunch, merely nibbling some cheese and a small apple. Everything was such hard work. The hose pipe, hanging nearly out of her reach in the shed, was almost too heavy to attach to the garden tap. Her arms and back ached with the effort.

‘Stump up, Marje,’ she told herself. ‘Get on with the job if you want that pond done before winter.’

Once she had struggled to turn on the tap, filling the pond was straightforward. It took longer, however, to turn the water off. Marjorie’s small fingers had difficulty grasping the tap and, not strong enough to shut down the water supply completely, she was annoyed to see a flooded, muddy area leaking and spreading around the carefully constructed pond.

It was getting dark, however, and she was exhausted. She would tackle it all tomorrow.

Stroking the figure’s spine, stretched along the stone slab like a medieval effigy, she refused to recognise that even here in the cold pantry his back seemed longer than ever.

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Tired as she was, Marjorie could not sleep. The weight of the counterpane smothered her, and at dawn, not sure whether she was awake or dreaming, she rose, disturbed by a squally wind.

Anxious to survey the sodden ground near the pond, Marjorie did not bother to dress, merely cloaking her shoulders with the coverlet, letting it trail behind her down the wooden stairs.

In the hall she was surprised to find that she had to stand on tip-toe to reach her knitted scarf. Stretching, she hauled it down from the hook and wound it round her neck, once, twice, three times. Still it seemed that the fringed ends dangled too long, but she let it be and reached down for her old gabardine rain hood which had fallen behind her gumboots.

Marjorie listened as the rain fell, thought of the mud, looked at the gumboots, and decided against them. There was no way she could struggle with their cumbersome weight. She'd rather have wet feet. She shuffled off her slippers in the hallway and padded towards the door barefoot, leaving footprints, like a kitten's paw marks, on the tiles.

At the doorway she paused, grappling with the latch. Once outside her head felt strangely light, airy, as if it were floating away from her body, and the rain-hood flapped loose on her short hair.

It took Marjorie a long time to make her way to the end of the garden. The half-a-dozen flag stones outside the scullery stretched beyond her like a courtyard. The mountain range of the rockery towered beside her, shadowed by a murky blackness

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seeping from the grille of the scullery window. She had to crane her neck to see the tops of the bushes; and the pond, when she reached it, stretched limitless, no further bank visible.

Wearied by her trek, her eyes blurred by stinging rain, Marjorie did not she see the wild rose twig latch itself onto the fringe of her scarf.

She did not feel the scarf stretch taut, and tighten, tighten, tighten.

All she knew was that the waters of the limitless lake flooded over her, as her feet slid into the ooze, and the mud clamped over her mouth and lidded her eyes.

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The watching figure rested his hooded head on his arm.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, his shadow stretched across the flag stones, a charcoal smudge advancing down the pathway. Bit by bit darkness clouded garden, peat-bog and pond until the figure at the water's edge lay like one sleeping, wrapped in a curtain of darkness. Only then did the shadow halt.

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