

12 THE FAIRY GODMOTHER

At age fifty, Ruth Babson realized it was always going to be like this.

She would wake up a little earlier than Will, her husband of thirty years, and make his breakfast of eggs and oatmeal and then his sandwich lunch. She would join Will at the table of their tiny kitchen and, in silence, eat her oatmeal and sip her tea, waiting for the sun to rise or the clock to strike six, depending on the season.

“Off I go,” Will would say, rising from his chair and wiping his mouth with a napkin. Leaning forward to kiss his wife, he would say, “Have a good day, love.”

“You too, Will.”

Ruth would see him to the kitchen door, painter’s cap on his head, packed lunch in hand, a fifty-five year old man with a snowy head and a snowy beard, his blue one-piece worker’s uniform faded with multiple washings. Then she would walk to the front door, opening it in time to see him drive off, the little blue box of a car rattling down a lonely road. Afterwards, she would stand in the doorway for a moment, her eyes resting across the road on the vast fields of barley that belonged to Angus Farms – for the most part silent neighbors until harvest time. Then Ruth would retreat into the house.

Since she and Will lived on the bottom floor of a two-story cottage that got repurposed as two separate flats, the housework would take up at most two hours of the morning. Then Ruth would do some knitting, some reading, some television watching, some web surfing. By around eleven o’clock, the cabin fever would get the best of her, and Ruth would take the bus into town.

There, she would wander, perusing the second-hand shops, grabbing a quick lunch of smoked fish and fried, thick-cut chips, and walk along the docks. She would end up on the beach, watching the steel-gray waves of the North Sea wash upon the tan sands. If it were summertime, then she would see kids, their skin as pale and soft as baby seals’ underbellies, running and wading into those waters, laughing in shock at the still-chilly waters.

Today was like any other day. Ruth sat upon the grass, watching the waves come and go.

Then her attention was drawn to a small group of children playing with a little dog on the wet sand. The children were two girls and three boys, and Ruth could not help herself from thinking those names: Little Will, Christina, Andrew, Neil, Dorothy. In her mind, she was flung back in time, when she was thirty-five and, having suffered the fifth and last first-trimester miscarriage, named the lost child, like she had named the others. Even though each loss happened well before the doctors could tell whether she carried a boy or a girl, Ruth was stubborn in her certainty of the name she chose for her five lost babies.

Seeing those happy children with their dog, she found herself crying in silence. *Stop it, Ruth. Just stop it,* she scolded herself, wiping her eyes with hands that smelled of smoked fish.

For the next fifteen years, Ruth learned how to let go of the dreams she had for Little Will, Christina,

Andrew, Neil, and Dorothy. Fifteen years of therapy and medication and guilt. Fifteen years of Will holding her and saying, “I’m sorry, love. I’m so, so sorry.”

The thought of Will made Ruth smile, and that broke the spell of her melancholy. The sky was bright and cloudless, even on this cold day, the day after Mothering Sunday. Ruth was warm in her coat, and her stomach was sated and content.

“Up you go, ol’ girl,” she said, rising from the grass, smoothing flat her coat and trousers.

She intended to go home, to wind down her afternoon, but on a whim detoured to Arbroath Abbey because the day was so beautiful and so cold.

On a day far from the tourist season, the worn red ruins of the medieval abbey stood silent on a close-cropped green field. A handful of town residents wandered aimlessly around it. Ruth walked along the round foundation stones of long-gone columns, on grass where a church nave used to be. She was lost in the silence of the place and so was startled when she heard a foreign-sounding voice before her.

“Still feels holy, doesn’t it?”

Ruth looked up from her musing, seeing a little, elderly nun smile back at her over half-moon glasses. The nun’s dark, deeply-lined skin stood in stark contrast to her perfect alabaster teeth and cotton-wisp hair that formed a halo under the white and blue habit. Keenly aware that it had been years since Ruth stepped into a church, she fell shy. “Ehmmm...”

The nun’s smile grew wider. “No?”

Ruth blurted, “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Ehmmm...”

The nun laughed and placed a soft hand on Ruth’s left arm. “No worries, dear. I’m not judging.” She walked ahead a few paces, looking at the fallen walls which once held up a vast, cavernous ceiling. “Oh, the faith that built those walls.” She reached out and touched the weathered red stones. “Sometimes, it’s better to have faith in the small than in the big.”

“Sorry?” Ruth stayed where she was, unsure whether the nun wanted to join her or not.

Still peering at the stones, the nun declared, “Looks like rain.”

“What?” Ruth looked up, seeing a sudden ominous cloud above. When she looked back to the nun, the nun was gone. Dumbfounded, she stared at the empty spot before searching the areas where a little old lady nun could have possibly gone in such a short amount of time. She gave up the search when the first fat drops of rain came down.

“Definitely time for home,” Ruth muttered, shaking her head. It was just a funny story to tell Will when he came home.

After slipping and sliding all the way home, Will eased the car onto the driveway, his eyes twitchy from

trying to see past the front bumper through the downpour. Parked closest to the back kitchen door, wishing yet again that the house had a proper garage, Will took a deep breath and then launched himself out of the car, racing for the kitchen door.

“Christ!” Soaked through, Will shivered as he grabbed a towel from the laundry basket next to the tiny washer in the kitchen. Not even bothering to turn on a light, he pulled off his wet clothes, piling them into the washer, and dried himself as best he could. Seeing underclothes and pajamas in the basket, Will pulled those on. Only when he was dry and clothed did he notice that the house was far too quiet.

“Ruth?” Will called out. Still toweling his hair, he walked from the kitchen, down a small hallway, to the sitting room.

“Here.”

Will stepped out of the sitting room, into the small foyer, and stared.

The front door was still ajar. Ruth was sitting on the floor, shaking from cold and wet and something else. For, pulled inside and just across the threshold was a large, low wicker basket. In that basket, wrapped in a brown blanket, slept a little baby.

“Ruth.” Will wrapped the towel around his wife.

“He was at our doorstep. Like a fairy tale. A baby in a basket.” Ruth rocked back and forth, her hands clasped together in her lap.

“He?”

“The note.”

Next to the baby’s head was a cream-colored card. Picking it up, Will read aloud the neat, handwritten script, “Please love this boy.”

Ruth started to cry. “What are we to do?”

Will looked at the card and then looked at his wife. “I suppose... do what the card says.”

Ruth gave a sharp bark of laughter through her tears. “Will --”

He reached out and stopped her rocking. “What’s his name?”

“I don’t know.”

Will set aside the card. He gathered the sleeping baby in his arms and, sitting next to his wife, handed the child to her. “You always know.”

Ruth bent her head low and gave the boy one, soft teary kiss. She breathed in his sweet, new baby scent, and the name came to her. “David.” She smiled at Will. “His name is David.”

Hidden away in the downpour, the little nun that was Cora thought, *Good name*. Then she wept, her tears mixing with the rain.

#

It was lunchtime, when four-year old David declared, “Mummy, I have a best friend.”

Ruth turned a little from the kitchen counter, where she was preparing sandwiches for herself and David.

“Is that so?” she asked. David was always with her, so she wondered when and where he would ever meet another child, to have a best friend.

“Yes,” he said, brightly. “She talks to me when I’m scared. When you or Daddy aren’t around. Like at night when I’m in bed but scared of the MONSTERS. She tells me not to be scared. That the monsters aren’t real.”

“Does your best friend have a name?”

“She says she’s my fairy godmother. So her name’s Fairy.”

Ruth smiled. *David has an imaginary friend*, she thought. “What does Fairy look like?”

David shrugged. “I dunno. I only hear her – I never SEE her. If I do see her, I hope she’s a dragon. Or a FLYING HORSE.” He struggled to open up his little bag of crisps. “Mummy, I can’t open this.”

Ruth walked over to the table and opened the bag. She saw her son happily grab a handful of crisps and shove them in his mouth. “David Ian Babson, manners!” she chided.

“Oh,” he said, his voice muffled with crisps. He chewed quickly and took a sip of his apple juice, swallowing the whole mushy mass. “Thank you, Mummy.”

Ruth shook her head, as she had scolded him for eating like a little barbarian, not for forgetting to say “thank you,” but she still kissed the top of his unruly, dark-haired head. “You’re welcome, Davey.” She returned to preparing the sandwiches.

“So Fairy,” David continued, “is my best friend because she’s always nice.”

“What,” Ruth said, “so your daddy and I aren’t nice?”

“Mummy,” her son declared, his voice authoritative, “you and Daddy are nice but not ALWAYS nice. Like telling me to wash up. Or – or eat vegetables.” He made a face.

“Oh, I see,” Ruth said. “Well, I’m glad you have a best friend now. And maybe, when you start school, you can make a friend that you can actually see. Wouldn’t that be good?”

“I dunno,” David said, frowning. “I like Fairy.”

“You can still keep Fairy,” she replied. “People can have more than one friend.”

“Oh!” His silver gray eyes brightened up. “Okay, Mummy.”

#

When Will arrived home late from work, he saw Ruth at the kitchen table, drinking a bottle of beer. His wife rarely drank, so he asked, “What happened?”

“Your son,” Ruth declared, “got in a fight at school.”

“What! Why didn’t you call me?”

She shook her head. “Nothing I couldn’t handle. And Davey’s fine – the other boy is fine. But it’s all so stupid.” She sighed. “Wash your hands and sit down. I’ll get your supper.”

“Where’s Davey?” Will washed his hands in the kitchen sink, dried them with a clean tea towel, and settled his old bones before the kitchen table.

“In his room, asleep. He didn’t feel like eating much, and I don’t blame him.” She got the covered ceramic

plate of roast chicken, potatoes, and Brussel sprouts that sat warming in the oven and set it before her husband, along with a fork and knife. “Wanna beer?”

“Will I need a beer?”

“Probably.”

“Okay, then.” Will saw Ruth open and then set down his beer before she settled back to her chair and took a long draft from her own beer. “So...”

“So,” Ruth said, “you know that Davey would tell us that he’d get teased. For looking different from everyone else. For looking different from his mum and dad. For having a mum and dad old enough to be his grandparents.”

“Yes, but he seemed to handle it well.”

“Perhaps in his primary school. The kids all lived close to each other, so they got to know Davey and us okay. But at his high school, there are more kids from different areas, and Davey says that he really stands out. Then one boy who’s been teasing Davey since the first day of term got ahold of his phone and saw our photo. He said that we were old and ugly. Och!” Ruth shook her head. “That did it.”

“So Davey struck first.”

“Yes.”

Will sighed, feeling a slight ache in his head. “What was his punishment, then?”

“Detention. He called me to say he’d be late coming home because of it. When he got home, he was fuming. Said he hates his school, hates this town. He wants us to move.”

Will ruminated on Ruth’s words as he ate his supper. After a sip of beer, he declared, “At least he said he didn’t want to run away.”

“Seriously, Will?”

“We have a good kid, Ruth. He was defending our honor.”

“I’d prefer he’d defend our honor without fists, Will Babson.”

He shrugged. “Tomorrow’s Saturday. I’ll talk to him first thing in the morning, all right?”

Ruth sighed. “All right.” She looked out the kitchen door, towards the direction of the bedrooms, and wondered how David was sleeping.

Twelve-year old David was dreaming.

He was walking under a warm, cloudy sky, among the fluffy cottongrass, and a female roe deer was walking next to him. She turned her small head to him and said, “I told you it was a bad idea.”

David sighed. “Fairy, you sound like my mum. Stop it.”

She shook her head. “Well, you should listen to her. It’s not good to keep your anger all stuffed inside and then, when you can’t stand it anymore, erupt in punches and kicks. You went from doing nothing to exploding. Haven’t you heard of using your words?”

“Fairy --”

“Good thing you’re a lousy fighter, or you’d really have hurt him.”

David chewed one corner of his mouth, trying not to get angry. “I remember when you used to be nice,” he said.

“And I remember when you used to listen to me,” she retorted.

David stopped walking; her words stung. “Don’t be mad at me, too, Fairy. You’re my only friend.”

The little deer turned around, bent low her head under one of David’s hands, and raised her head. In response, David slid both arms around her warm, brown neck in a tight hug.

“Listen,” she said, “I know it’s hard dealing with awful people like that boy. I wish I could tell you that bullies go away when you’re older, but I’d be lying. How you win is defend yourself, yes, but in a manner that makes everything better, even a little. And after today, all that boy – besides everyone else who saw you -- has is the idea that you are violent, on top of the other wrong-headed, dumb ideas he has of you. Now, does that help you or hurt you?”

“But Fairy --”

“WELL?”

David didn’t answer.

“I thought so.”

In spite of himself, he started to cry. “It’s too hard,” he said, sniffing. “It’s not fair.”

“Oh, my sweet boy,” she said. “You’re right. It’s not fair. But you’re brave and kind-hearted, and you can do hard things.”

David’s legs buckled underneath him, so the little deer followed suit, her four, spindly legs tucked neatly underneath her body beside the boy. Still hugging her neck, David said, “I wish I could see you out there. In real life. Not just hear your words in my head or as animals in my dreams. I wish I knew what you look like.” He buried his face into the deer’s neck, smelling her wonderful scent of earth, flowers, and sweat.

“Ah,” she said. But she didn’t continue with his train of thought. “Promise me, no more fighting. You know better than that. You are smarter than that. I know six years feels like forever at your age, but believe me, it will go by fast enough, and you can leave all this nonsense behind. But only on strong footing, do you understand? Only when you build a solid foundation can you launch into a happier life.”

“Like a rocket ship?” David asked.

The little deer smiled. “Like a rocket ship.”

He sighed. “All right, Fairy.” He sounded sleepy.

“Good boy.” She carefully dipped her head down as David slumped to one side, and Cora left him, slumbering among the cottongrass in his dream.

#

When David came home from work, he was surprised by his parents waiting for him at the kitchen table.

Still wearing the painter’s uniform of his dad’s former employer, he didn’t even have the chance to change clothes, for Will pointed to a piece of paper on the table and asked, his voice still strong and stern for all of his seventy-six years, “Explain this.”

Still standing, David looked down at the table and immediately recognized the letter. He didn’t even need to read the print, the date of four years ago, the familiar letterhead of a university located in the United States. He looked away. “It’s an acceptance letter.” He tried not to get angry. “Where did you find it?”

“In the shed. Your mum and I were decluttering, and we found this, shoved in an old box filled with your kid stuff that we were sorting through.”

“Oh.” David shook his head, thinking, *Shit, I thought I threw it away.*

“This is the first time we’ve heard of this school, Davey,” Ruth said. “If this is an acceptance letter, then why are you still here?”

“Yeah,” Will chimed in. “What the hell happened?”

David stared at his parents. “Don’t you remember, Dad? Four years ago you fell at your job. The hospital, all that physical therapy, and they still made you quit.”

“I retired,” Will corrected, his voice sharp.

“Whatever,” David replied. “Either way, it was against your will.”

“Davey,” Ruth said.

David heard the soft, pleading tone of his mother, and he sighed. “Sorry, Mum.”

“Just tell us why you kept this a secret.”

He sighed even deeper and then sat down at the table. “I didn’t know if I could get in, first of all. I mean, no one in my school even applied outside of the county, least of all a university in another country. Second, I didn’t even know if I wanted to leave. It’s so far away from you and Dad.” He shook his head. “But then when Dad had his accident, and then everything got so shitty...” He trailed off. “I mean, I was already working part-time at the body shop, and what with finishing school, it was easy just to go full-time.” He looked straight at his father’s eyes. “I don’t regret it.”

Will replied, “That’s a damn lie.”

“Will --” Ruth began.

“It’s a lie,” Will continued, not breaking eye contact with David, “because you kept this letter, even though you turned the offer down. You kept it as a goddamn memento.”

David looked away. “So? What if I did?”

“So I will not have you use me as an excuse to being a damn coward.”

“DAD.”

“Your mum and I read this letter, Davey. It was a chance to get a bachelor’s and a master’s degree in one go! With a full scholarship -- in Mathematics! I didn’t even know you liked Maths!”

“That was a long time ago.”

“No,” Ruth replied before Will could interject. “Four years isn’t a long time ago.”

“Mum --”

“Your dad and I want you to reapply.”

“WHAT.” He glanced from Ruth’s face to Will’s, and then back to Ruth’s. “Are you serious?”

“Deadly serious,” Will said.

“But it’s too late --”

“Davey,” Ruth interrupted, “you made me a mother at age fifty. NOTHING is too late.”

“But what if I don’t get in this time? What if there’s no scholarship?”

“Well, then,” Ruth said, “at least you tried.”

“With no regrets this time,” Will added.

David picked up the letter and stared at it. He looked up at his parents, two elderly people whom he loved more than anybody in the world.

Like a distant echo, he heard Fairy’s voice in his mind, *I told you so.*

He chuckled, shaking his head. “All right,” he said. “I’ll do it. But only because you won’t shut up about it unless I do.”

“David Ian Babson, manners!” Ruth chided, while Will leaned back and guffawed.

#

David leaned back and tried not to cry.

He had handled his mother crying in the airport okay, as she broke down, saying, “My boy, my little boy,” over and over again. He had handled his father with good humor as his father gave well-meaning but embarrassing advice, reminding him to focus on his studies and make sure not to get any American girl pregnant. Ticket counter, baggage check-in, security screening, even waiting for boarding – all that time, David only felt the nervous excitement of one life ending and another life beginning.

But as the plane climbed high into the sky, he had leaned over from his window seat to look through the little porthole window. He saw the green coastline of his childhood home for the first time and felt a sob rise up in his throat. He quickly leaned back into his seat, shutting his eyes, as his thoughts raced. *I’m not gonna cry, I’m not gonna cry.*

“Here,” said a quiet, lilting voice.

David opened his eyes and saw the passenger who sat in the middle seat in that cramped economy-class section of the plane. She was a little old nun, her dark face a mass of soft wrinkles framed with snowy-white hair and a blue-and-white veil. At the time when he boarded, his row was still empty. When she had arrived for her middle seat, with only a small carry-on to tuck in front of her, she had smiled at him in acknowledgment, her eyes peering at him over half-moon glasses, but then bowed her head down, perhaps in prayer. She remained that way, even when the plane took off with that odd lurching sensation of humans not meant to fly suddenly doing so. Not wanting to disturb her, David began to look out the window. After all, he had chosen the window

seat for that reason, right?

But then homesickness hit him, threatening to make him sob like a child in front of complete strangers.

Looking at the nun, David saw that she was offering a white handkerchief, neatly folded in a little square. He stared at her, not sure what to do.

“Take it, my dear,” she said, in that strange yet soothing accent.

“Thank you,” he murmured, not daring to speak more firmly lest his voice break into a sob. She bent her head down again, giving David a modicum of privacy. Turning back to the window, he held the handkerchief to his face and let the tears fall in silence.

As David cried, the nun who was Cora, who had spoken to David with her Ina’s voice, forced herself not to reach out to him, to gather him in her soft arms as she once did when he was a tiny baby named Caliban. Seeing him made Cora feel homesick as well: for a world that no longer existed, for two people in her life that she hadn’t seen for an incalculable period of time and didn’t know where they were. Even though she had seen David grow up and had intervened personally on occasion when he needed guidance, she was still startled by how much David resembled her beloved brother Peri, while having the eyes of Setebos. And yet he was his own person, a grown man at twenty-two years old, and she knew that her time being his fairy godmother would be coming to an end.

Although she had given the handkerchief to David to hide his tears, she had originally brought it with her to hide her own. As she sat there, her head down, she felt the small tears fall, leaving little wet spots on her clasped hands. “Here,” she heard David say. She looked up and saw him offer her handkerchief back to her. “Ah,” she said, smiling. “Keep it.”

“Are you sure, Sister?” he asked, looking concerned.

Oh, my sweet boy, Cora thought. “Yes,” she said aloud. She dried her eyes with the palms of her hands. She knew that David was not one for small talk, so she said, “I think I’ll nap now.”

“Oh, okay,” he said. “Sweet dreams.”

The transatlantic flight was an overnight one, so at one point David also fell asleep. In his dream, he was walking again among the cottongrass, but this time Fairy arrived from the sky, as a snowy-white flying horse. He reached up, laughing, remembering his early childhood wish that Fairy be a dragon or a flying horse. When she landed, he hugged her neck, smelling that familiar scent of earth, flowers, and sweat.

“Will you be coming with me to America, then?” he asked.

“Only if you need me,” she replied, “although you’re a grown man now. Aren’t you worried that I’m just a figment of your imagination or, worse yet, some kind of hallucination?”

“Don’t say that, Fairy,” he said. “You’ll always be my best friend.”

Fairy made a sound that was both a neigh and a laugh. Without having to be told, David hoisted himself onto her back, and they flew up, into the bright blue sky. The summertime glens fell away underneath them as they climbed higher and higher. Soon, David saw the coastline of his home, then the curve of the Earth, and

then, magically, the entire planet, a beautiful marble revolving in the cold, inky dark. He leaned forward, burying his face in Fairy’s mane, and murmured, “Thank you, Fairy. Thank you for everything.”

David woke up to the sound of the flight attendants coming by with the food and beverage carts. Looking for his seatmate, he saw that the middle seat was empty; even the nun’s carry-on was gone. On the far right was the other passenger on his row – a businessman, from the looks of him.

“Excuse me,” David asked, “but where did the nun who sat in the middle go?”

“What?” the businessman said. “What nun?”

“The nun who sat in the middle seat.”

“Nobody has the middle seat,” the businessman replied. “I bought it so that I could have some space.”

David stared at him, wondering if he was joking, but the businessman looked so severe and grumpy from being woken up that he said, “Oh. Sorry. My mistake.” But then he looked down and saw that he was still holding the white handkerchief. He brought it to his face once again, to confirm that his earlier memory was real, and he suddenly noticed a familiar scent – of earth, flowers, and sweat.

“Fairy!” David exclaimed.

The businessman on the aisle seat, some nearby passengers, and a passing flight attendant glared at him, alarmed.

“Sorry... sorry,” David replied, his voice quieter. He covered his face again with the cloth, for he could feel new tears forming. *Fairy*, he thought, *was that... goodbye?* He started to shake. *Please don’t let that be goodbye.*

#

Returned to the shores of the Purgatorial Sea, Cora looked at Ariel, her heart breaking. “Thank you,” she said.

“You only made it harder for yourself,” the angel said, “physically appearing like that.”

“I know.” She hugged herself, trying not to cry. “But I wanted to grant his wish, of seeing me face to face, since his time with me was ending. I mean, I can still hear him. He misses me.”

“He will always miss you,” Ariel said, “but he’ll be fine.”

“I know. Because your daughter is there.”

“Cora, technically she isn’t --”

“You helped your Beatrice, whom you love, become pregnant,” Cora interrupted. “In my book, that makes her your daughter. And she probably sees herself like that, too.”

Ariel looked at Cora but said nothing.

She shook her head, her composure regained. “So,” she said, “time for me to undergo the Reboot and lose my memories.”

“No.”

“No?” She looked at him, confused. “But you said that, once my time with Caliban is done, then I’m to undergo the Reboot. My time on Earth is over.”

“Yes, I said that.” Ariel frowned. “But something has happened since then.” He opened up a portal.
“Follow me.”

“Where are we going?”

“To Setebos.”

Cora stared at him. Many questions clamored to her mind, but she simply said, “I thought I wasn’t supposed to know where Setebos is after Uriel took him away.”

Ariel sighed.

Cora looked at him, waiting.

“We fucked up.”

“WHAT?”

He shook his head. “You’ll see for yourself. But suffice it to say, you are Setebos’ Beatrice – and he needs you.” He stepped through the portal.

Cora didn’t hesitate to follow after.