

Preparatory Study – Girl in the Wood, c. 1642

Cass Dalglish

He emerged from the buckthorn and juniper along the edge of the brook, wearing a long black coat that made him look tall and pale to the girl. He was carrying something, a rolled parchment, in his right hand while his left was hanging, as though he was walking side-by-side with an animal so low it was hidden in the grass, as though he was tethered to a hound so small it didn't reach his knee.

When he came out of the tall grass and turned up the path toward the girl's home, the animal disappeared and she began to wonder if there had ever been a hound at all. Maybe she'd seen a phantom, attached by a trace, to the messenger's shadow.

Now he was standing at the front door, waiting. And then her father appeared, so the girl moved a bit closer. The pale man handed the rolled parchment to her father, who turned to go back into the house. But the courier was saying something, something that caused her father to stop, loosen the wrapping string, and unroll the parchment.

Once again, the girl moved closer, so she could hear what was being said.

Her father was displeased. "This is a demand."

The courier nodded.

"By Michaelmas. He demands I repay my debt to him by Michaelmas." Her father looked her way, the parchment shaking in his fist. "This is about you."

She was handed the page and she recognized the marks and their tone.

Her mother was looking over her shoulder, reading the words out loud. "You may not keep her forever in your paradise! The visit must end by Michaelmas."

The girl's father went inside to his library and came back with a hastily written letter of his own. "Take my reply back to London," he said. "She will

return on Michaelmas, at first light."

Just like that. Her father was giving his word again. She'd be returned to her husband by Michaelmas – three days away. He was promising he'd see her off by first light on Michaelmas. Could he be serious? Had there been a promise all along that she would return to London by Michaelmas? Her reprieve wasn't supposed to be a temporary one, was it?

Of course the date mentioned was no surprise. Her father was always promising someone, something, by Michaelmas. The last of September – when leases began, when servants were hired, when rent was due, when debts had to be repaid, when borrowed horses had to be returned to their owners.

Everything was to happen by Michaelmas. It was her father's favorite promise.

But she couldn't imagine her father meant to send her back like a debt repaid, like a borrowed horse returned. In her mind, it should have been the other way around. Her husband should be setting her free. He had no need of her. He was a man, and he had his life. A boring one at that, she could see that he was bored, sitting around scowling and writing all day. He was always against something. That was obvious during the pitiful month she'd stayed with him. So she had convinced her parents to bring her home.

"Your husband agreed to let you go if you were back by Michaelmas," her father said.

"You made that kind of bargain?" The girl kicked off one shoe. "That was silly of you. Sillier than your decision that I should marry him in the first place."

No one thought they were a good match. Did they even bother to think about her happiness? Not likely. She was 16 years old. What could she do these days in London? There was no life there. The important people were here in Oxford. The people who knew how to dress and have fine parties.

"I will not go," the girl blurted out. "It's a holiday! Dinners and dancing. Laughing and singing." That's where she belonged. Right there in Oxford. People with good sense lived in Oxford. After all, even his royal highness had left London for Oxford. He knew better than to return. People hated him in London.

"There is nothing for me to celebrate in that city."

"Perhaps such amusements are against your husband's religion," her father said. He put the rolled parchment in the center drawer of his desk and sat down.

Her mother was rubbing her hands together. "This husband you chose for our daughter is old. He dresses in grey. He spends his nights writing complaints."

The girl knew her mother was on her side. "The man argues with everyone. He irritates everyone."

"He is your husband," her father stood and walked toward the door.

The girl's voice was a whisper. "I gave him a month..."

"And I have given my word."

"She is young," the girl's mother said.

"First light on Michaelmas," her father said. "She will leave."

The next day, the pale messenger returned, and the girl could see he was scarcely older than she. He carried another note asking for a payment of some kind, a piece of family land perhaps, a parcel that would guarantee the truth of her father's pledge. "Your failure to make payments in the past is what has brought us to this point," the note said.

The girl's father shook his head and sent the messenger on his way with nothing.

One of her friends said she was lucky to have a husband. Even an old crotchety one. Even in London. But what use was London to her? Didn't anyone understand? Why did everyone want to tell her what she ought to do? She knew she wouldn't go back.

She'd been spending her mornings alone since she'd come home, walking in the gardens and the fen along the stream. She'd grown to need the scent of the juniper, the shapeliness of sweet berry trees, and the young buckthorns—little more than saplings—growing side-by-side, forming a curtain around patches of yellow and white daisies.

For the girl, daisies were flowers that held off the gloom of winter, tokens lovers gave each other until they had no choice but to embrace the chill. Even St.

Michael had used daisies to ward off darkness. But her mother warned her to be careful of the flowers once summer was over, everyone knew that daisies changed their meaning. After Michaelmas, the only message daisies carried was, *goodbye*.

The girl pulled a cluster of berries from a branch and heard the water hissing in the stream. She could see light moving in small wave patterns, and sun tips cutting shallow shadows in the air. It was the end of September and the trees were full of dark berries. But there were warnings about the berries too...you had to eat them by Michaelmas. Her neighbors were always saying things like that, religious things, eat the berries before Lucifer crashes them to the ground. Eat them before he falls.

The girl's husband hadn't liked her talking that way, too traditional, too Catholic. But if he was so against tradition, why was he sending her father all those letters about Michaelmas?

She saw the messenger again the next afternoon. He was telling her father that he would be there, at first light, the next morning. "The gentleman I serve insists...if I do not bring her, I must return with some other adequate token in her place."

In the night, the girl heard her mother's voice. It was a quiet-quiet-quiet, hush-hush-hush voice. A should not, should not, should not voice. A silence silence voice. And then there were the crickets, the crickets.

Would first light come early or late the next morning? The girl had been wondering since the messenger's first visit.

Either way, she would not be there when first light made its appearance. She would wake before light and begin her walk in deep shadow. She knew her father well enough to know that he had many debts coming due on Michaelmas. He'd never be able to take care of them all. If he didn't find her at first light, he'd shuttle the idea of returning her to the back of his mind, stuff it under the clutter of other postponed promises.

She knew now what she would do. She would wake before light, be in the woods before morning

opened to full sun, and she would not return until after her father had forgotten his pledge.

The next morning the girl arose in the dark and took the path from her parents' home as it wound down around a soft hill and turned sharply into the buckthorn pressing against the banks of the rushing stream. Just past the turn, she felt something different in the air. A stirring. She listened for a faint streak of sound, a light screech, a high scratch. Not musical, not chimes in a morning breeze, but a hawk circling the tallest trees, frightening a young animal separated from its nest.

Then a falconer's whistle, summoning an unruly peregrine back to the arm of its master.

The girl crouched on the side of the path, whispering into the brush. Where was this hunter? Where was the sport in his endeavor? Her brown curls bounced against the shoulders of her deep green dress as her hand swept through the grasses. Safe, safe, safe, safe, safe, she was saying, safe, safe, safe, safe, safe. She wasn't thinking now about the light seeping into the sky above her. She'd found a small creature and coaxed him into a nest she made in the skirt of her dress. Carefully, she lifted her skirt and moved to the bank of the stream, where there were openings to rabbit burrows. She reached up to the branch of a black berry tree, plucked a handful, and gently dropped them to the rabbit nestled in the folds of her dress. Swish swish swish, she whispered to the rabbit as she rocked the small creature and gently carried him toward an opening in the soft black earth. Trickle trickle trickle trickle, she sang to the brook. The rabbit scurried into shelter, and she moved back to the path, away from the trees so full of berries they looked like shadows.

First light was brightening to a morning golden. Her father's appointed time had come and gone. It was well past the moment that he would worry about his promises...or look for tokens to send in her place. It was Michaelmas Day. Summer was gone.

The girl went to the patch of daisies. She slipped off the scarf around her neck, swung it over her head until the air ballooned it into a large sack and filled it

with an armful of yellow and white. She knew they couldn't ward off darkness and gloom any more, and that was fine with her. Now the daisies would carry the message she wanted to send. She walked back out of the woods and returned to her parents' home. The tall pale courier was there waiting, but her father was nowhere to be seen, so she gave the messenger a few coins and placed the bundle of Michaelmas Daisies on the seat of his cart. "Take the parcel to the man who demands my return," she said.

She would not be going with him, but he wasn't to worry. The man in London would understand that the daisies were the "adequate token" he was waiting for.