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Julian Grant
Columbia College Chicago

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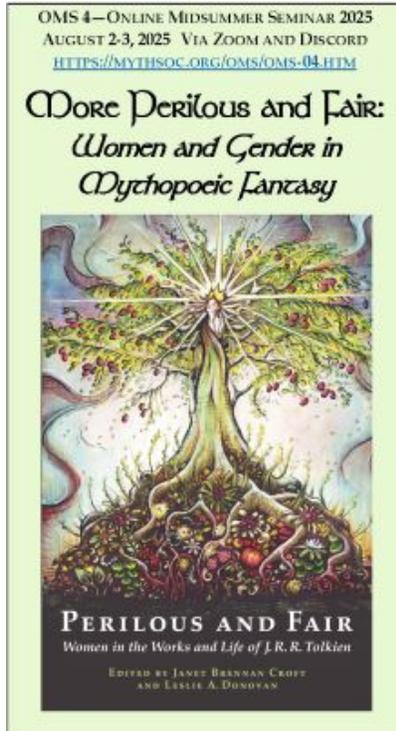
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Abstract

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Additional Keywords

Story; Fiction; Julian Grant

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The Little Wild

By Julian Grant

The “Little Wild” is what she called it—and it shall be ours forever.

We had bought the farmhouse when we finally had had enough of the city (Poppy agreed, the city had become too dangerous and noisy). As we were both older, without children, having met later in life at the Popular Culture Association Conference in Boston, we were both determined to make our soon encroaching Senior years as enjoyable as possible. We made for an unlikely couple what with Poppy's paper on psychoanalytic theory and gender in Fairy Tales, while my own talk was a stump speech for the Graduate Program in library science we offered at Northwestern. We bonded on archival methods, preservation, organization, and best practices, marrying almost a year to the date of our first encounter. No odder couple had there perhaps ever been. We were visually unique as well. She, Rubenesque and committed to smoking a pack a day, while I maintained the thin physique that I had championed while at school. Poppy would tease me as “*Jack Sprat, the boy who would eat no fat*” nursery rhyme hero, and I was too polite to ever voice her comparison.

We were both in our late forties when we finally moved to the country and bought the large old farmhouse that had been abandoned by its previous owners and which needed some work before it could be occupied. The house was a mess of disrepair and neglect, but Poppy was determined to make it into something beautiful. She took on the restoration project with gusto while I busied myself at my job as a senior archivist at Northwestern University Library's Special Collections Department. I had worked there since graduating from university (the same one where Poppy studied, it turned out), having spent several years working on my master catalog of the variant manuscripts and publications of George MacDonald. His “Golden Key” was the basis of my theory to the Princesses, Giants, and Fae who gamboled through his writings.

Together, in our new home, we both worked diligently to put everything to order. I sanded, plugged, and painted inside while Poppy took on the front garden. We both agreed that the garden acreage in the back of the house was best left as is. Originally the farm had boasted a small greens and herbs bounty that had exploded into a warren of wild, overlapping vegetation. Thick snarls of basil, celery, and lettuce we were stumped to identify (I found it finally—flashy trout back) had swallowed the full garden, with a thick entangled row of white ash soaring above us at the edge of the property. All of the original farmland had been sold off and developed into housing plots that loomed around us and the area we now called “The Little Wild.”

I spent a lot of time out there, sitting on the back porch facing the overgrown garden looking up at the night sky. The air was so clear here that I could see all of the stars each evening.

“You're not afraid to be alone out here?” Poppy asked one night as she joined me by my side. “I mean, you don't feel like you need someone else around.” She put her hand on mine where it rested on my knee and squeezed gently. “It's okay if you are,” she said softly, but firmly.

“No,” I replied.

Unlike Poppy, I saw no gossamer strands of mystery here nor anything to worry about. I was content living in our idyllic home with Poppy by my side and had no fear of the unknown or metaphysical wonders at work in the dark. Here, in the peace of our home, I could ponder the play and nonsense of MacDonald's work as I rejoiced in the peace and quiet. Poppy's study, in the spare bedroom upstairs, was where she wrote and dreamed and lived with the myriad of creatures that made up her life's work. As a bibliophile, all I needed were my books and the serenity of our farm. Wrapped in a blanket on the back porch, I graded papers, and Polly would slip out to smoke, having

agreed that cigarettes inside was a to-be-avoided decision. I abandoned my study of syntax, language, and idiom as I turned to her.

“Look, there are fireflies,” Poppy cried as she snapped off the small reading lamp we had set up for my work. Instantly, we were transported into the thick dark you only find outside of the city. As a formerly dedicated urban creature, I had fibbed to Poppy when I told her earlier that I was not afraid to sit alone in the dark in “The Little Wild.” Being fully alone in the dark was something I did not relish—but I knew that my fears were irrational. The little tests I would set for myself to push beyond my natural reservations were long ingrained. It would not serve my wife to know how my heart started to race, the spit souring in my mouth as the velvet crush of night consumed us.

The flutter-fly of the insects coasted above and beyond the snarls of brambles and vegetables. In the dark, I reached for my wife's hand, wiping mine first on the blanket as I willed my heart to stop its pounding. We sat there, neither of us speaking, as Polly sighed, her cigarette forgotten.

The next thing I knew, the fireflies were gone and I was alone on the couch in the dark. “Poppy?” I whispered, glancing about myself as I wiped the sleep from my crusted eyes. “Poppy?” I whispered again, my voice hoarse as I sat up and looked about the garden for her. There was no sign of her anywhere in the backyard. I stood from the couch and made my way up to our bedroom, where she might already be abed. It wasn't uncommon for me to doze outside only to find her already asleep.

She was not there either—nor were any of her clothes or belongings strewn about on the floor as they had been when we returned home after dinner with friends a few hours earlier. The empty rooms sent me into a panic; it felt like I had awoken, like Rip Van Winkle, only to find the world had changed alarmingly.

I glanced outside towards “The Little Wild” as a light, amber-colored, spilled from deep within the snare of shadowed greenery. Peering outside the window, I could see pockets of illumination sparking to life in the black night. “Why would she go back there?” I wondered as I slipped back downstairs, grasping the flashlight by the back door.

Stepping out into the now cold very early morning, I tried to turn the light on only to realize that the batteries were not working.

“Polly?!” I cried, a little louder now, concerned that she might be back there with a little candle or match. She would have surely taken the flashlight to find her way—and if she too discovered that it wasn't working, perhaps she was finding her way by candlelight?

Underneath my feet, the ground was slick, showing the clear track of what I could only assume was Polly moving deep into the “Wild.” I rubbed at my face, pushing the last of sleep away as I saw two, three amber lights pop to life in the garden. There, deep in the bristle, flickering lights too big to be fireflies sparkled as the tantalizing aroma of roasting meats tickled my nose.

I pushed further into the weeds, inwardly cursing myself for not thinning the stalks and strands of wild weeds and bushes that created the maze that was our back garden. Polly had loved how rich and untamed the world was—“...a home for small animals and perhaps more,” she'd teased one night as I nodded in half-agreement.

As I pushed further into the bush, I recited to myself the various eponymous fairytales and legends I knew that had influenced Irving's classic tale. The third-century story of the legendary sage, Epimenides of Knossos, the Christian story of the Seven Sleepers, and the German folktale “Peter Klaus” all boasted elements of the rudely awakened sleeper finding the world changed much to their shock and dismay. My own revelation was surely more prosaic, and I would soon find my wife curled up reading or perhaps writing by candlelight. I had long learned to tolerate the eccentricities of our marriage and Poppy's whims, as she had endured my endless and systematic organization.

“It is what makes us special,” Poppy had smiled, one night when we were in bed talking, as couples do, of the faults and findings of their marriage. “I dream, you do, too, and together we shine,” she said, snuggling next to me.

I crouched down as a robust wild rosebush blocked my path, the lights of the golden yellow candles just beyond.

“Did you bring food out here?” I called as, again, the scent of rich-seasoned meat came to my attention. She'd brought home the remnants of the prime rib she had out tonight and perhaps she had fancied a late-night, early morning snack as she explored the garden. Again, another eccentricity one learns to live with when married. Poppy enjoyed her food.

“I'm not hungry,” I called out. “But I'll bring out some wine if you'd like?”

As Poppy was the one who had chosen this spot for our impromptu rendezvous, it seemed fitting that we should enjoy ourselves. She would be happy to see me, and I could only hope that tonight would be like all other nights when we were together: uneventful and peaceful. The night air was warm and heavy with the scent of the wildflowers in bloom from “The Little Wild” as I struggled through into the other side.

“Shall I get the wine then?”

I pushed myself through the small gap in the foliage, marveling at how my larger-than-me wife could have navigated such tight quarters. As I pushed through the final cover, my eyes popped wide as I beheld the miniature fantasy world before me.

There, under four stanchions burning bright, my wife danced in abandon with the sprites and fairies I had read about throughout my life but never believed in. A pig, impossibly small, roasted on a spit turned by leaf-clad people all clapping and singing as Poppy gamboled and played with them.

You must understand, fables, myths, and fairytales may have been my area of study—but like most academics dedicated to any discipline, I had long lost the fancy and marvel that made the tales special. My world was one of order, versioning, and cataloging. Poppy was the true believer while I was the skeptic. I no sooner believed in the world of fairy than I did the modern-day equivalents of Bigfoot or Elvis or other celebrities still alive after death. None of this made any sense to me.

Yet, there, right in front of me, my wife danced in miniature and smiled and laughed as the assembled peoples celebrated her. None paid any mind to me at all, impossibly large, as I watched the joyous celebration unfold. I could barely breathe as the dance continued unabated.

“How are you doing this?” I called out. “This isn't possible.” She looked at me finally, smiling as she danced, and called out, “I will always love you.”

The crowd cheered louder than ever as Poppy continued her dance with the sprites and fairies. She smiled at me again, that beautiful smile of hers which always made my thrilled heart ache.

And then I woke, on the couch on the back patio as the sun blossomed across the sky. It was now morning and I had spent the night outside, apparently.

I laughed, hardly able to contain myself, as I gathered up my papers and books, none the worse for wear for having spent the night outdoors, looking forward to sharing with Polly my own Winkle story. Orkney's tale of the Ring of Brodgar immediately came to mind as well, as did H.G. Wells's *The Sleeper Awakes* as I clambered up the stairs. I was now Zelazny's science-fiction protagonist Corwyn, having survived the underground lair with otherworldly people. Poppy would adore this.

The doctor says it was the combination of early menopause, her BMI, and the cigarettes that caused the heart failure. She'd died sometime earlier, while I was sleeping on the couch outside. He assured me that she hadn't felt any pain.

I had been a very lucky man. I was forty-eight years old, and Poppy was forty-nine when she passed. Each night she dances still in “The Little Wild,” and if I am careful and the time is right, I am able to go and see her in the wee midnight hours. I have a lot of work to do still. I have to write the story that Poppy always wanted me to write, and then publish it as a final gift. It will be an epic tale about two people who are both immortal and whose love endures. It will begin as all good fairy tales begin.

Once upon a time...



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