

The Making Of A Wise Woman

by

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The man is talking to the river. He's tall and hatless with straight black hair to his shoulders. His long coat is shiny at the elbows and his yellow brocade waistcoat is frayed around the buttonholes.

Agatha decides he must be, or once was, a gentleman because she sees gentlemen in the village and they wear long coats and waistcoats. She's noticed the frayed buttonholes even though she's only eight years old because her mother mends buttonholes for money. The farm is not enough, despite the long hours her strong father works. Not with eight of them to clothe and feed.

But what makes Agatha eye the man with piqued curiosity is that he's talking to the river. Talking to the river is her job.

Or rather, the river talks to her. When the river is low it whispers, shushing its way over the sandbanks like the silks her mother sews shush over Agatha's hands. Then, as the tide comes in, the waters swoosh and swirl like storm clouds, but steadier, swifter, louder, and the swans and gulls hitch fast rides alongside the trows.

All the time, the river talks to her. The river tells her she is a good girl, which is what Father says when she finds the eggs the hens hide or wakes in the night to feed the motherless lamb by the kitchen fire. The river tells her that it and Agatha are one, the same, spilling over the mudbanks and lapping the stony cliffs together – always.

The man takes two long steps towards her. His black hair glistens like raven feathers in the bright sun. Gold flecks glint in his dark eyes.

'Hello, young mistress.' He bows formally, even though he doesn't have a hat to doff.

Agatha stares. She would put her thumb in her mouth only Mother has beaten the habit out of her and she daren't renew it.

The man keeps smiling. 'You come to the river often, don't you?'

She nods.

'I've seen you here, talking to Sabrina.'

Who, where, is this Sabrina? She turns her head so quickly her untidy curls slap her cheek.

The man laughs. ‘Sabrina is the name of the river,’ he says, gesturing towards the placid wide stream flowing at this moment down to the sea.

(Agatha imagines the sea as numerous rivers mingling side by side, haphazardly running off to the edge of the world in the same way Mother’s ribbons fall tangled over the edge of her sewing basket.)

‘That’s not the name of the river,’ she says. ‘It’s got another name ...’ She frowns.

‘You mean the name the ordinary folk call it?’

‘Yes.’

‘You and I are not ordinary folk, young mistress. We are wise. We call the river by her goddess name, Sabrina.’

‘God?’

‘No, goddess.’ The man comes closer. ‘Shall we go?’ He offers his hand for her to take, if she wishes.

Agatha looks at the hand, which doesn’t go away, so she takes it and the man leads her alongside the hedgerows and tells her the names of the flowers growing at the edge of the fields and sprouting from the hedges themselves.

‘Here is yarrow.’ His long fingers caress the froth of lilac flowers which remind Agatha of the lacy trims Mother sews on hems. ‘Cures colds,’ he says. ‘And toothache.’

He holds a feathery stem of tiny flowers the colour of fresh cream to Agatha’s nose. She sniffs and her eyes crinkle. ‘I know this one,’ she says. ‘Meadowsweet. Mother says I’ll carry meadowsweet when I marry.’

‘Marry?’ The man raises a dark eyebrow. ‘Does she, now?’

He collects feverfew and says, ‘I’ll dry these and when I see you next I’ll make you a present of them. They’ll make you strong.’

Agatha wants to be strong, like Father.

The autumn sun is young enough to retain summer’s warmth and Agatha dawdles past thinning hedgerows while she ponders the latest of the wise man’s lessons. Marking a milestone in her years of learning, she was trusted with brewing a potion of belladonna, the dried berries blended with holy water from the sacred well which the wise man carries down from the forested hills. She recalls the hot day he and she harvested the shiny black fruit, stored with care and her hands

bathed afterwards with honey-scented tallow soap. Belladonna, he told her with a lift of his dark eyebrow, aids in forgetting past loves.

Agatha is on her way to the field with Father's dinner. She hasn't eaten since milking and her stomach roils at the smell of the warm bread in her basket. Her fingers find their own way under the cloth to tear at the grainy loaf. She pops the stolen crumbs into her mouth and swallows without chewing, as if her lack of savouring the morsel will negate the sin of the theft. Another sin to add to the long list with which her brothers taunt her.

'Lazy Agatha,' they say when they find her by the river talking with Sabrina. 'Idling your time away. Our father spoils you, girl. He should be reminding you there are cows to be milked and butter to be churned. Back to your chores.'

'Fey.' They snigger when Agatha sets down her sewing needle to follow the fire's sparks spitting their escape up the black chimney. But Father's eyes smile at Agatha from over his clay pipe.

'Wilful,' the brothers claim when she refuses to respond to their hounding about where she goes when her tasks are (mostly) done. Her brothers would, but cannot, follow her. The wise man has seen to that. 'Lovers' tryst?' they used to tease but the teasing has turned to scowls since Agatha grew to young womanhood, still with untidy curls.

Agatha cannot see Father in the field. She sees the plough, the harnessed horse standing quietly, flicking its tail. She frowns, and runs.

Father lies spread on the ground behind the plough. His arms are flung wide and his eyes stare into the sun. She stands over him, banging the basket against her skirts, taking great gasping sobs.

Her strong father! No!

'Hello, Agatha.'

The man is there, summoned by Agatha's need. She drops the basket and blinks at him.

'Is he dead?' she says between sobs.

He squats down, presses his fingers to Father's neck, lays his too-long dark hair on Father's unmoving chest.

'I'm sorry, Agatha.'

'Raise him!' she cries. 'You're a wise man ... return him to me!'

He shakes his head.

Agatha's mind gallops. 'Bergamot? Rue and rosemary?' she pleads. She beats her fists on his ribs. 'Tell me! There must be something! There must!'

The man takes her hands in his own and presses their bunched fists to his yellow waistcoat, much faded now but with the buttonholes neatly mended by Agatha herself. She leans her head against him and cries her pain.

'No,' he murmurs into Agatha's hair. 'You know this. You know there is no tincture, no potion to raise the dead. You must be strong. Remember, you are not ordinary folk.'

Agatha leans away and reaches inside her gown to crush the muslin bag of dried feverfew she always wears. It doesn't make her strong, doesn't ease her pain.

'Go home, let them know.' He glances up at circling ravens. 'I will watch until you return. And afterwards, Sabrina will comfort you.'

The farmhouse fills with women laying out Father's body while comforting Mother. Agatha's brothers rebuke themselves with pursed mouths and angry eyes. One of them should have been ploughing the field, not Father.

'No,' Mother says. She embraces each in turn. 'Father loved his alone time with the soil and the sky and the horse. God took him at his best.'

Agatha is jealous that God may choose when is the best.

The funeral service is made longer by the icy chill instilled deep in the ancient church's flagged floors and stone walls. Agatha clasps her gloved hands together more in an effort to warm them than in piety. Mother sits beside her. A new veil made of dressmaking leftovers disguises an old hat and her Sunday best black gown has been sponged into cleanliness.

In the cemetery, Agatha stares down the slope to the river. Sabrina flows fast to the sea, her waters thick with sails and plumes of steam trailing like kite tails. A cattle boat is being hauled across by the ferry and the cows low their panic into the air. The goddess does nothing to soothe them. Instead, she reaches out to Agatha, the damp wind carrying her message: 'Be strong, Agatha, be strong.' Agatha presses her hand against her chest where the feverfew lies.

On the other side of the grave's maw, her brothers glare at the coffin as it's lowered into the earth and Mother throws the first clods onto the shiny wood.

Tomorrow Agatha, Mother and the brothers will leave their tenant farm. They will live in the village, in a house where Mother and Agatha will sew dresses for the shopkeepers' and merchants' wives. Agatha has no wish to sew dresses. She wishes

to sell herbs and potions to cure people of their ills, but Mother and her brothers shrink from the idea.

‘Witch!’ the brothers accuse her.

The older brothers introduce the younger ones to their new trades of fishing and brickmaking and it’s from one of these trades that Agatha receives the attentions of her first beau. The visitor is dressed neatly in dark trousers, a clean collar on his shirt and a brushed coat. His shoes shine like belladonna berries. He twists his hat in fishhook-scarred hands and mumbles his thanks to Mother for the tea.

Agatha and the fisherman walk the river path and Sabrina whispers in Agatha’s ear: ‘Be strong, Agatha. You are not ordinary folk. You are not for the likes of him.’

Not for the likes of him?

The fisherman lunges at her, wraps his arms about her and kisses her, hard, on her surprised open mouth. He has salmon breath. Agatha pushes him away with a mocking laugh.

‘Why?’ she says.

‘Why not?’ The fisherman grins. ‘We’ll wed and I’ll kiss you whenever I wish.’

‘Will you?’ She laughs again, lifts her skirts and runs through the mud, up the lane and into the street where the merchants’ and shopkeepers’ windows light her way home.

Behind her, the fisherman chortles his pleasure at this maidenly game.

‘Well?’ Mother sits in the candle’s circle of light. She sets aside the collar she is edging with green ribbon and rubs her eyes.

‘Well what?’

‘When will you marry?’

‘Marry?’ Agatha throws out a hand. ‘Him?’ Her stomach twists.

‘Yes, him.’ Mother sighs. ‘Your brothers pay their way. But you, Agatha, pay nothing and are never here to help with the sewing or the chores. The Lord alone knows where you go.’

Agatha moves to the fire although she doubts its poor flames will warm her sudden chill.

‘Since we’ve come into the village,’ Mother says, ‘there’s gossip about you.’

‘Gossip?’

Sabrina whispers in Agatha’s ear: ‘Be strong.’

‘Yes.’ Mother’s voice is weary. ‘They ask me if you’re sickly, if you suffer from visions, as they see you walking by the river talking to yourself.’

‘And you tell them ...?’

‘I tell them you grieve for your father, I tell them you are a spiritual young woman. I tell them a sturdy husband and lusty babies will settle you, the sooner the better.’ Mother rises from the chair and takes up the candle. ‘You will marry the fisherman, Agatha.’

Agatha’s world darkens.

From her bedroom window Agatha watches the flames of the Samhain fire cast the louring clouds in pink. A heavy wind offers the noises and smells of the celebration to her like an unwanted gift: the ordinary folk cheering and laughing, the fiddles screeching, the smell of scorched wood with undertones of beer and cider. Her mother and brothers are there. Soon the lumpen fisherman will knock on the door, confident, brash, demanding Agatha take his oar-like arm and dance smiling around the fire like any maiden about to be married with her posy of meadowsweet.

Agatha’s breath catches in her gorge. ‘Be strong,’ she whispers.

She runs through the cobbled lanes down to the river. She carries a lantern which swings like a call for help as she takes the sliver of path out of the village, through the tall reeds to the emptiness beyond. Hatless, her curls tug at their roots as if demanding the freedom of gulls. Agatha stops, the lantern at her feet, breathing in the river and staring across the waters. She waits for Sabrina’s murmurs.

Sabrina is as low, grey and swift as the sky. Trows nestling against the far bank until the tide’s turning are defined by their lights while the ferry lights quiver on the undulating surface like raddled stars.

‘Hello, Agatha.’

The wise man is there, summoned by her need. They stand side by side, close. He smells of apples and fire.

‘What does Sabrina say tonight?’ he says.

She listens. The voice of the river murmurs to her, straining through the wind, trying to be heard.

‘She is sorry for my unhappiness,’ Agatha says, although she is unsure of this. Sabrina has never been a consoling goddess. ‘She says I am to be strong, as she was when the soldiers threw her into the waters and the nymphs blessed her with divinity.’

The wise man has taught her more than herbs and potions.

‘Does this mean I should follow her? Throw myself into the river?’

The wise man humphs. ‘That is one path. But you are stronger than that.’ He offers his arm for her to take, if she wishes. She lays her hand on it. ‘Come now,’ he says. ‘There is another learning waiting for you. If you choose to embrace it, you will take a different path. A harder path.’ He covers her hand with his own, un-gloved one.

Agatha lets him lead her away. Her heart thumps.

The sun wakens her, creeping across her pillow like a week old kitten. Agatha is in her own bed. She half-opens her eyes, closes them again and pulls her knees up to her stomach, her arms hugging her breasts. Her memories are sweetly fuddled.

‘Will you drink?’ The wise man had offered her a clay cup which steamed in the cool air of the cottage. Agatha took the cup and breathed the grassiness of Lady’s Mantle, the citrus tang of lemon balm. A glass jar of poppy seeds sat by the mortar among dried yellow flowers and curling leaves.

A potion of love and lust.

And, Agatha knew, more, much more. Other magic crouched in the warm liquid – magic to carry her into the shadowlands, to commune with spirits, to soar with them like gulls fly with the winds. She had let out a shuddering breath and drunk from the cup, one long swallow, staring into gold-flecked eyes which clawed deep into her being, snatching at her soul.

The leaping, sparking fire had mocked the tawdry village flames and heated the sweat-slicked arms and legs tangled on the hearth mat. Too-long dark hair feathered like ravens’ wings brushed Agatha’s burning face and her tongue sought the sulphurous odour which settled on her lips. She grasped the power, savouring the dizzy joy.

Afterwards there was the night sky, the white moon chasing the tempestuous clouds. Agatha rode above the river, laughing, her cheek hot against the wise man’s

back. The wind whirled her hair into the silvered darkness, the spirits pressed against her and an exultant Sabrina called, 'You are strong, Agatha.'

She pushes back the blanket and peers down at her languorous body. It appears to be the same body as yesterday, although clothed in chemise and drawers rather than a nightgown. Her dress and cloak are folded on the chair under the open window. She sits up and swings her legs over the side of the bed. She winces.

When she throws the blanket fully back, she sees the spot of blood which stains her sheet.

Agatha stares at the spot and licks at the taste of sulphur on her lips. Her pulse quickens. Her path is chosen.

Mother refuses to allow Agatha out of the house. The villagers bring their gowns to reshape to new fashions, and breeches and skirts to let out for growing children. They cast sidelong glances at Agatha and ask Mother about the girl's health in loud whispers. Mother tells them Agatha and the fisherman will marry in the spring and a sturdy husband and lusty babies will soon set her to rights. Agatha cannot wait, Mother says.

Agatha bends closer over her needle, as if in modesty.

The snow is deep. The wind howls across the river and shakes the thin glass in the windows in its frustration at not being allowed in. Agatha wakes in darkness and works beyond the setting of the winter sun, finishing each day rubbing eyes made sore by the flickering tallow of the cheap candles.

Mother is grateful.

'You're a good daughter after all,' she says, and Agatha smiles and threads her needle in the smoky light.

Her body has kept its languorous contentment and she sews absently, her mind cavorting with secret, gleeful half-visions. She stretches like a cat before the fire and agrees with Mother that she cannot wait for spring.

Her brothers watch her with narrowed eyes, as if she is an imposter and where is their fey sister? They don't ask, believing the idea of marriage has settled her wildness.

But as winter moves with its usual sluggish pace towards spring, Agatha feels more changes in her body. At night she touches her swollen breasts and counts back ... During the day, Mother tilts her head and says, 'Love is making you bloom, Agatha. You will be a beautiful bride with your posy of meadowsweet.'

Agatha shrinks into her chair. She fingers the bag of feverfew and stares at the fire, reliving gold-flecked eyes and the night wind in her hair to smother images of fish-hook scarred hands and salmon breath. She harvests her strength for all the courage she can reap.

While the household sleeps, she wraps herself in her cloak and quietly unlatches the door. The night is lit with frozen stars lorded over by a full moon. Agatha runs past the inns where the sailors' and fishermen's bawdy songs stumble drunkenly into the road, praying the lustful singers won't decide now is the time to seek their trows and huts.

She runs past Father's grave and across fields where sheep glimmer white in the darkness, her boots slipping in the mud. A hunting owl calls encouragement, steadying her. Agatha stands on the cliffs above the river with her cloak wrapped about her, reaches into her gown for the muslin-wrapped feverfew, and waits.

When he doesn't come, her courage frays like cut rope. He's telling her she must marry the fisherman, have babies, make Mother happy. Assure the villagers Agatha is ordinary folk, like them.

The wind from the river lifts Sabrina's voice: 'You are not ordinary folk, Agatha. You chose your path on Samhain. You are strong.'

'I am strong,' she whispers.

His cottage above the river shows no light. Agatha tries the latch and the door opens wide, welcoming her. There're no flames leaping, but the moon sends a stream of silver through the window to light up the table and the shelves, the stripped bed and the two chairs by the swept fireplace.

The shelves which held the results of her lessons are empty. The table where she spent countless tranquil hours is not bare, however. A glass jar of dried leaves labelled Raspberry Leaf stands there. Here is a choice: raspberry leaf can solve Agatha's problem right now, or it can help later to ease her birthing pangs. She presses both hands against her stomach.

Next to the jar stands the mortar and pestle, and a newly stitched muslin bag which Agatha knows will contain freshly dried feverfew. And hard by the feverfew is the stone bottle of belladonna potion.

'To forget past loves,' she murmurs. She lifts it. Only a little remains.

There is one other item in the cottage – a besom broom leans into the corner by the fireplace.

Agatha runs a hand through her curls and smiles.

There is only the night sky, the white moon sailing the tempestuous clouds as smoothly as the wherry gliding on its great cables across the river below. Agatha rides with the wind whirling her hair into the silvered darkness, laughing, feeling the muslin bag warm against her skin.

Sabrina reaches up, whispering: 'You are strong, Agatha.'

In the moonlit cottage, the jar of raspberry leaf sits unopened on the table. The stone bottle? Its shards lie scattered on the wet flags of the floor.