Cautionary Tale of Girls and Birds of Prey

Once there was a girl who knew the hawk’s eye was on her, the perching branch in the oldest oak loomed outside her bedroom window. In the hunting time, the girl ran between the house and barn to do her chores. She ducked at any sudden shift in the wind and stifled her need to cry, a sound she knew from mice, chipmunks, and rabbits.

Only the snakes went quietly when plucked from the grass, but she knew their writhing was a form of screaming.

Soon, her father grew impatient with her fear and began to bait the bird with offerings of bloody chunks of beef.

He meant to calm the girl through exposure, though her eyes glassed over at each feeding. In the fall, the bird struck, sinking talons through the tendons of her neck, into the muscles on her back, catching her beneath the shoulder blades and lifting.

In the end, the pain and the wind ripped any sound from her throat, but her father saw her from a distance, twisting. No time to reach the rifle, no time to raise an alarm. Instead, he built a shrine at the base of the oak and worshipped what she left behind:

a lock of hair, a baby’s tooth, dried blood on a bandage from a scratch the night before, and her prayers for protection,

a battered jewelry box filled with bits of fur and the bones of smaller prey.

Sandy Longhorn

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