

EZZIE

THE INSPIRING
STORY OF THE
GREATEST
HEALER WHO
EVER LIVED

Mme. Esmerelda Txeronnna

(and a millennial)





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INTRODUCTION

Born into relative poverty 83,597½ years ago in the small Irish village of Ballyhoomoloney on the border of Kerry and Leitrim, Mme. Esmerelda Zxeronnna Johnson Lee Lewis III began her industrious life as a farmer's daughter in the rich and vibrant cultural landscape of the prior emanation of humankind. When her remaining family were wiped out by the eruption of the Toba volcano 75,000 years past, the industrious Ezzie, having much to give to the world, sought refuge in the corporeal apparatus of one of the few survivors, the wife of a great nobleman, and thrived for millennia thereafter disseminating her healing wisdom throughout human history.

This is the torrid story of her struggle to raise humanity to its former glory by inventing all manner of technological and cultural advances that were destroyed in the disaster and so healing the quantum energy field of the earth.

Today, in a world swarming with dissatisfied and troubled millennials, this great healer has finally released the epic story of her life as told through her memoirs, court records and letters to the complaints departments of large corporations.

Herein the reader will find such great inspiration and edification so as to continue the ascent to the greatest elevation of humanity, its restoration to its former peak of scintillating glory under the gentle tutelage of The Greatest Healer who Ever Lived: Her Eminence Mme. Esmerelda Zxeronnna Johnson Lee Lewis III.

PRAISE FOR EZZIE

“Possibly the greatest story ever told.”

- The Ballyhoomoloney Community Newsletter.

“The inspiring tale of the greatest woman who ever lived... and lived... and lived some more... and still lives.”

- Sarah Praxton, English Teacher, Ballyhoomoloney Secondary Girls’ School.

“I couldn’t put this book down for fear someone would find it.”

- Deceased Citizen.

“Codswallop!”

- Mme. Trianalaa Zerces, Ballycumlonely, By the Big Red Barn, Co. Cavan.

“NO REFUNDS!”

- Mme. E. Zxeronna.

ONE

The millennials say that the best stories start *in medias res*, that is, *in the middle*. Now, stories is one of the things the modern millennial is good at, relatively speaking, so here goes: KABOOM!

“Jaysus Billy Murphy!” says I, “You’ll take the bleedin’ door off its hinges!”

“Never mind the door Ezzie, I need to make you an honest woman!”

“What are you on about, get up off the floor Billy Murphy I just swept it! Aren’t you supposed to be birthing the brown cow?”

It was Tuesday, and Billy Murphy usually spent Tuesday afternoon with his brown cow. Billy was a donkey farmer by trade and my consort, though I’d never let him make me ‘honest’ as he put it and I wasn’t about to start now.

“The volcano Ezzie, it’s going up!” he says.

“Oh Billy you’re an awful auld eejit, what are y’on about?”

“The Toba Volcano Ezzie, down past the bend and over the big hill half ways to Ballymuckstones! It’s goin’ up in smoke it is! We’ve got to either flee for our lives or make you an honest woman! Take your pick Ezzie!” says he.

By the standards of your time and place dear modern reader, we’re talking seventy five thousand years ago, but the world was a smaller place back then. Ireland had Five Counties and we, me, my Daddy and three sisters lived in Ballyhoomoloney on the border of Kerry and Leitrim. Contrary to what Billy Murphy was spouting on about, the Toba volcano was in

Indonesia, which was on through Ballymuckstones, right at the fork, over the grassy hill, left at O'Brien's cottage and straight for a day, but Billy didn't know this because he'd never been that far from home but I knew the O'Briens as Molly O'Brien was one of my clients and I did her DNA Activation on the first Saturday of every month for years now. Nevertheless, if what he was saying was even half true I didn't have much time for carnal honesty with Billy Murphy, and if he'd left the brown cow alone on a Tuesday in lambing season then I thought this must be serious.

"Right ho!" says I, "Best go clean up out back then Billy, I'll go get the priest and we'll do the right thing, then if he's a while coming I'll bake you a batch of stone cakes and there's nettle jam in the press."

Now Billy was not the smartest man in the world, but I was very fond of him and I always imagined that he'd die of a curse or a fall down a well, but I was rapidly discovering that sudden changes were afoot and I'd have to cut loose some of the baggage so I wriggled into my flowery dress, being both my Sunday best and my favourite attire for reading the Tarot for a client and I slipped out quietly to give Daisy a farewell. Around the back porch I could hear Billy Murphy splashing around in the rainwater butt and he was whistling a little tune that I knew he only whistled when he was very pleased with himself and he was making all squelching noises as he rubbed himself down with his favourite rag I kept there for him.

Ah, Billy Murphy! Had fate been kinder to us we could have been happy for thousands of years. I think of the beautiful dress he bought me and all the mornings I smacked him on the belly and said, "Get outta' here ya durty leech, me daddy will be back soon and if he catches you in the bed there'll be hell to pay!" Then I'd wait 'till he had one leg out the window and I'd give him a kick in arse before he had catch of the drainpipe and he'd be laying in the muck below shouting, "Ezzie ya dirty bitch, with all I do for you then ya go kickin' me out the window!" and I'd shout back at him that I'd stop kicking him out the window when he stopped falling for it and then I'd slam the window shut.

Poor Billy Murphy! I do miss him. So anyways, I gave Daisy a pat on the hindquarters and stole Billy's bike. It had a seat on the back for me for when we went for our Sunday ride, and I suppose I could have saved him,

but he would have slowed me down and he seemed so happy playing with his water. So as Daisy lowed me a great big ‘Mooo!’ and Billy Murphy exclaimed in delight as the cold water splashed all around his nethers, I pointed her down the hill away from the billowing smoke, kicked up my legs and started my new life of selfless sacrifice to the human race. Go Zxeronnna!

Of course then, there was the small matter of whether the human race deserved my sacrifice.

I would have taken the motor vehicle but I didn’t have far to go, you see, and it had a family of cats in the carburettor and I’d been at Ronnie Magee to fix it for me but he said he couldn’t, seeing as I hadn’t paid my bill from the time I drove it into Dunphy’s gate when I was belting down the Muck Road again I was late for my Tarot reading with Tessa O’Donovan. Oh Tessa ye see was a big auld haughty gilded muff, all billowy in her silk dresses and real shoes and she’d be up in arms if I was even an hour late and I had to take the Three o’ Swords out of the deck whenever I went to read for her ’cos one time she was asking about if her husband was gone cheating on her or just off to the fair in Ballykettle Cross like he said he was, and I says to her, “Relationship readings they cost extra Tessa luv!” and she came back, she did, with, “Would ya ever get outta’ that Ezzie I didn’t pay ya extra for a reading ever in me life, not even the time you found the dog that ran away!” And she was right, I remember that, out came the Four o’ Wands an’ I told her, “Your dog Willie has gone to a better place,” and right enough he’d gone over the fence, round the corner and wasn’t he living with Cormac Quinn and eating tripe and cabbage. Now, Cormac Quinn was a very distinguished gentleman, and he was fond of the cabbage, solicitor as he was. I gave him quite a bit of my business back then and since I often smelled of cabbage myself, I thought one day he might turn his fancy towards me. I think he must have been a puff because Billy Murphy said my mystique was enchanting whenever he was about down there and in O’Reilly’s pub on a Friday evening I’d often have two or three boys from the village looking to get at my cabbage patch and they’d all be buying me drinks and I’d slip them under the table to Billy who’d be down there playing bones with Charlie Doyle, but they didn’t know that, so they’d be getting drunk and I wouldn’t be imbibing as

fast you see, then I'd stick an old pair of knickers from the charity shop into their pockets, check their wallets for donations to the cause, and push them over in the road so as next day I'd get on the blower to Patty O'Byrne in the telephone exchange and I'd say, "Call Jimmy Quinn," or whoever it was, "an' ask him if he left his shoe here last night." Right enough, an hour or so later, Patty would call back and say, "No, Mr. Quinn possesses a full complement of shoes, you see." Now Patty was a right prissy, perfumed auld tart 'cos the telephone exchange had sent her for a week's training in Dublin where she learned new words like 'indisposed' and 'contravene' and she must have thought I was tickling half the men in the village and she may have started that rumour but it wasn't true because I was only helping them to contribute to the arts, and when they'd get the message that they'd had opportunity to loose a shoe in Ezzie's house, despite that most of them couldn't afford shoes, well they were so chuffed that they forgot all about their empty wallets and went down the pub to brag, and Billy would threaten to punch them in the nose, though, what with all the free drinks I fed him, he was the secondary benefactor.

Cormac Quinn didn't know what he was missing because I would have worried his butter churn in an instant but he had to give the dog back anyway even as he'd named the poor thing Wendell, which was marginally worse than Willie though the dog didn't mind, but the Three of Swords was *cartona non grata* with Tessa O'Donovan because, while the cards were clear that her husband had in fact gone to Ballykettle Cross, and had attended the fair, it hadn't been for the kind of dairy livestock that he had disclosed to her but rather for a go on Sally Maguire's milk duds, though in fairness he wasn't the only one at that business, and so emerged the Three of Swords, the heartbreak card. In short order we were discussing how best to curse him, for while, I explained to her, he had to get it somewhere and she was a desiccated old crone with flannel knickers that I knew because I saw them stuck in the bars of her gate the night of the big wind, well I also had to make a living and Tessa O'Donovan, for all her faults, did always pay her bill.

All sudden then I was forcibly dismounted from my propulsive contrivance by a dirty big rock on the edge of the road at Quigley's Corner and planted face first in a pungent mixture of muck and manure

with my beautiful flowery dress all up over my head and I couldn't see but I heard a voice behind me and was grateful that I was wearing my best knickers.

Silky smooth it was, delicate and fragrant like pig liver stew in a draughty kitchen. "Oh, good woman!" the voice trickled through the air like honey, "Are you hurt? May we assist you? Oh, you've soiled your beautiful dress!"

"Hemmmh," I thought as I righted myself and advised the sympathetic party that turning arse over teakettle into a pile of pigshit was going to have that effect, and that they could feck off with themselves unless they'd happened to bring a washboard and a bar of Reilly's carbolic soap, but then I realised that, not only were these people fugitives from the volcano just like me... but they were LOADED! Oh my yes! I'd only heard the stories, but one look at the flowing white silk blouse on the one with the braided gold hair and I knew she was the Mistress of the Big Hill round by Paddy's Field and she was stinking rich, and her husband was now rounding on us looking suspiciously at me with the muck dripping all down my best flowery dress. He was a Celtic god, strong chin, with a dusting of black hair around the mouth with no food stuck in it and long black locks twisted back like the Queen of Sheba and a bellowing authoritative voice with which he declared, speaking to her rather than to me, "This wrinkled old wretch, leave her be Wife, she's the crone from Ballyhoomoloney. You're as likely to get cursed as to help her, and we must flee the volcano!"

"Hemmmh, well now, wrinkled wretched old crone, am I now? Hemmmh. Cursed are ye now? Hemmmh, right ho!"

And I cursed them! Right there and then! Right on Quigley's Corner in the waining daylight with the smell of muck and cabbage heady in the air, I reached out my hands to curse her first. But then a strange thing happened you see, as I reached my hands to her neck to give her a cursing she wouldn't forget, for her own good of course, I caught her petrified stare and started moving closer, which scared the living daylights out of me because my feet, they were planted square on the ground, adhered there in fact by the muck that had dripped off me during this troubling exchange.

Two of her servants were extricating the front wheel of Billy Murphy's bicycle from the mound of muck in which it had taken residence and suddenly stopped what they were doing and spun around just in time to see me smack head first into the good Lady of the Hill.

There was a slurping noise and I was torn right out of my dress through the neck hole and then the big lad with the beard and black locks had his arms around me, but he wasn't attacking me, he was feeling me up he was, and then I was inside the flowing white silk gown and for the first time in my life I didn't smell the cabbage anymore.

The servants abandoned the bike which promptly fell on the ugly old crone on the ground and began pulling my hair back into place and one had produced a vial of oily green herbs and waved it about in front of me, producing an enchanting odour of roses, and I realised I was looking down at my old corporeal apparatus which was pleading with the Chieftain, my new husband, to be taken in his care to the High Priestess of the Hill as a terrible curse had befallen her at the hands of the crone. Though for all appearances she *was* the crone, and I just thought, 'Go Zxeronna!'

My new husband, the Chieftain, well he thought it was his personal responsibility to repopulate the earth after the disaster. We survived in the caves along the coast of Co. Cavan which sheltered us from the plumes of dense ash, and the sky went all dark and swirly for a thousand years but we just stayed home and played scrabble and did the repopulating. Servants were sent back to Leitrim to get my sparklies and some of them died on the way and I lived in luxury with a gold ring for every finger and beautiful gemstones in my hair that scattered coloured rays from the fire onto the walls of our cave. We grew turnips on the land and ate trout from the sea every evening and then read the Tarot and retired to bed to do the repopulating he was so fond of, then we'd sleep until noon. He never suspected a thing. We'd go swimming in the nip along the coast and one time the cave flooded and we had to flee for our lives, him carrying me over his shoulder so my feet wouldn't get wet and me cussin' and cursin' at every eejit that looked like he might have been the one that left the french doors open. It was a hoot!

Now it's true that people back then lived much longer than the millennials of today, that's something I invented, fresh meat I say! But still my beautiful husband's jet black beard eventually went grey and his glorious locks followed and receded over his head like the setting sun below the horizon and it was time to move on. So I gave him a light cursing so he'd pass away soon and wouldn't have to be without me for long, then I jumped into the body of a beautiful maiden and, just as the ash from the Toba disaster was clearing from the sky, I packed my bags with the choicest turnips and set off on a spirited white mare called Sally to start inventing the human race again.

TWO

I had seen nobody on the road at all, but the sun was high in the sky, streaking through the last remaining ashy grey clouds, and my beautiful flowery dress, which had long ago been restored to perfect condition by My Lady's servants, was all billowing behind me as Sally made a rousing pace over the high mountain peaks and enchanted forests of Cavan, and with a good day's travel under my belt I came to the Big Red Barn outside Ballycumlonely. I was surprised to see that the Big Red Barn was still standing at all, but even more surprised to see that it appeared to have a new coat of paint and a sleeping billygoat tethered to the loose pillar of the door frame.

Dismounting Sally, I left her to a rainwater puddle while I had a look around back. I hadn't moved a dozen steps when I heard this unconscionable rattling noise like belches rising from a hole in the ground dug straight down to hell. I stopped dead in my tracks and was gripped by fear as the sound repeated, the barn shook, and a little songbird that had briefly perched overhead happily tweeting did in short order turn over and fall to the ground dead, waking the billygoat who gave his condolences in the form of a low but emotional bleat. I reached into my bag and found a wedge of mouldy cheese I was going to eat with my turnips later and I broke off just enough to plug my ears so as I not suffer the same fate as the little bird, then I reached forward and pushed the freshly painted side door of the Big Red Barn which, it appeared, had also been freshly oiled, for the hinges didn't grind nor squeak. Venturing inside, I could feel the ground shake under my feet but the blessed mouldy cheese kept the evil from penetrating me to the core. A big swirl of fresh hay rose into the air,

danced around angrily and settled to the centre of the barn again and I knew that whatever godawful thing was causing this offence against decency was behind the haystack. Peering around, I saw a tawdry green tartan skirt and two big knobbly feet sticking outta' it and they was shaking as the noise resumed. "Hold on just a minute now!" I thought, casting my mind back some thousand years plus a few weeks, "I remember that smell!" Just then the monster stirred and up sat the most hideous creature in all of Cavan!

"Ya dirty auld bitch!" I greeted the creature, "What right has you to be killing all the little birds with your hell snoring?" I challenged the creature for I firmly recognised now the sickly green tartan.

The creature rubbed its eyes and fixed me in a cursing stare and I raised my right hand to make the symbol of protection against it. Promptly I divested myself of my cheese just in time to hear the creature drawl in a saccharine sickly voice the texture of vomit, "Who are you?"

"Who are *you*?" I retorted, though I knew full well now it was my arch nemesis Trianalaa Zerces, the smelly auld hussy of Ballycumlonely, famed throughout the Five Counties for giving excellent value to her clients, so long as you could source the penicillin afterwards.

"Ezzie!" it bellowed.

"Mother o' Jaysus, even the Toba volcano couldn't kill the likes of you then hemmmmh? Would you look at the state of ya?"

"State of *me*? Ezzie I said it before and I'll say it again you're painful as a splinter in the arse crack!"

"Whaaaat?" says I, 'cos I didn't have a comeback for that and I needed to distract her so she'd let down her guard and I could curse her straight to hell where she belongs. Then I caught a glimpse of the empty bottle beside her with the fluorescent green effluent within. "Medicine!" I says, "Ya filthy auld cow you've been having a go at the medicine, with any luck you'll do yerself in and I won't have to curse you!"

"Ooooh," trilled the stinking auld bat, "that's not very nice Ezzie, I make the best medicine in this Five Counties I do!"

“Whaaaaat?” Well, I couldn’t restrain myself! This creature liked to be known as ‘*Madamme Trianalaa Zerces*’, if you don’t mind! Her mimicry and deceit was legendary and hadn’t she just gone and lived through the eruption of the Toba volcano by hiding in the barn drinking some concoction of green medicine she ‘invented’, though she couldn’t invent a rock on top of another rock, being the eejit she was! It was a great surprise she hadn’t gone blind.

“Medicine?” says I, “Medicine? You couldn’t make medicine if your life depended on it, *I* make the medicine! *I invented* the medicine!”

“Ooooooh!” It trilled again, impressed by my salient argument and gyrating its wrinkly woggle in a most disgusting manner.

Now I’m not proud of myself but y’know, needs must and I hadn’t had a sup of the medicine for some time and while it clearly hadn’t improved the sight, smell, disposition or wellbeing of ‘Mme. Trianalaa Zerces’, I had to consider that I needed a place to boil my turnips and she *had* managed to survive despite that she was auld as a the Cliffs of Moher down Kerry way and hadn’t even had to switch bodies, perhaps didn’t know how, poor wretch! So I kindly asked her, “Gentle Mme. Zerces, is your green medicine cursed or uncursed?”

One of her greasy eyebrows slithered lower on her face as she regarded me carefully before answering, “Uncursed!”

“Perhaps if I were to curse it for you it might be more efficacious,” I offered with an unwarranted degree of generosity, though hoping somewhat that she’d give me a sup. If she lasted a thousand years drinking the stuff I could perhaps drop a light protective enchantment on it and maybe it’d wash down my evening turnip.

“I don’t need your help cursing my own medicine luv, I’ve been doing that since I was a girl!” Given how long ago this would have been I doubted this was true.

I shuffled a little closer and the creature clutched the half-full bottle of green medicine and I realised that tact wasn’t going to get me anywhere with this anvil-headed pillock, so I reached into my satchel and produced the most glorious turnip you’ve ever seen! It was a rich toffee colour on

bottom, still hairy from the ground, and atop it had a glorious purple crown with great tufts of green foliage bursting forth in a stunning display of epicurean delight. I could immediately see I had the creature's attention, so I jiggled it around and, pausing a moment for effect, I offered, "Swap luv?"

When she wasn't looking, I extracted the cockroach from the bottle and discretely and lightly cursed the medicine so as it be safe to drink, or, well, *safer* at least, then as we munched on our turnips the sun descended the sky in the east, casting long majestic beams of light through the stacks of hay as a chill came over the barn.

"Ezzie?" the creature sweetly pronounced, simpering.

"What is it?" I grunted.

"Do you be reading the Tarot these days?" it enquired, to which I, being in mid-swallow, nodded ascent.

"I lost my Oracle cards Ezzie, a goat ran off with them!"

Now, vile creature she surely was, but I have to admit, life without the Tarot would be a difficult pill to swallow for me, and this desperate creature must surely have been distraught by the loss of her Oracle, despicable and useless as it was, but I realised then that I only had my favourite deck with me, and the others were back in Ballyhoomoloney all covered in the ash of the Toba volcano, so whatever this wretch wanted, she wasn't getting at my Tarot cards, not that she could use them anyhow, so I decided to preempt her request.

"You want me to read your Tarot then, do ya?"

She thought for a moment and, seeming unwilling to admit that this isn't *all* she wanted, she drawled out an unconvincing, "Yeeees!"

"My Tarot deck is cursed luv, so if you're thinking of pilfering it be warned you'll be dead in a week!"

"Oh no Ezzie! I would never think of doing thaaaat!" The creature droned.

"Well, I suppose you'll be wanting the DNA Activation too?"

A look of concern came over her, perhaps she was astounded by my generosity. “Oh... no Ezzie, I don’t think I’d survive that.”

I fixed her in a cursing stare and was just about to throw the bottle of medicine at her before realising there was a good three mouthfuls in it yet.

“Ermmmm, I mean, Ezzie... with me in my... depleted condition you see! And with your DNA Activations being soo... *potent!*”

“Right ho!” I said cautiously, having to agree that the millennium she spent wallowing in this fetid place had rendered her in a state that could rightly be called ‘depleted’.

So I took off my blouse and spread it out on the level top of a low-down bail of hay and rummaged in my satchel for my Tarot cards. The creature smiled plaintively as she awaited the wisdom of the Tarot to be dispensed atop her in the way that only Mme. Esmerelda Zxeronnna can dispense.

“So!” says I, “Ordinarily I’d let you shuffle the cards, but with your being a greasy fetid lump of a thing I think I’ll just draw for you!”

“Oh... Yeeees!” she droned.

Now, not many people can read the Tarot, and none as good as me. I *invented* the Tarot, and this thieving vegetable could only copy me badly. You see, you millennials wouldn’t understand what it’s like to be in a place and that makes you *not be* in another place, because at that time, we had only physical places, we didn’t have the *Metaverse* or the *Net Curtains*, you see, we had to choose one place to be and then go to that place and be there and then come back, so while I was *being* in Ballyhoomoloney tending to my clients’ spiritual needs I couldn’t also be in Ballycumlonely, which gave charlatans like this Trianalaa Zerces ample opportunity to copy me and do untold damage to the wellbeing of their clients who rightly should have been *my* clients, and would have had a lower fatality rate had they been.

“Haha! The Fool!” I nearly spit my medicine across the barn when the first card she got was the Fool, oh be the hokey, I do *love* the Tarot, it’s so... insightful.

“You’re the Fool ya durty auld eejit, haha!” I laughed out loud for some time as she stroked the back of her hand with the other and stared embarrassed at the ground.

“Oh, Ezzie, don’t be unkind, the Fool just means that I’m on a journey of discovery... a *fresh, new* journey!”

I fixed her in my best disdainful stare and explained condescendingly, “Yes luv, a *journey* yes. Perhaps it will lead to your being less of a dirty eejit!”

Then came the Six of Pentacles.

“Haha!” I chortled, “This is the charity card luv... like I’m being charitable to you now, ’cos you see the only advantage an eejit like you has is that one day someone might take pity on you!”

The creature was starting to learn from this experience, and seemed to be holding up well to the instruction, so in the kindest, most healing spirit of the Tarot, which I invented, I continued her reading as would any consummate professional.

“Ooooh... the Hierophant! Well now, have we being having a little trouble with the authorities? Excommunicated perhaps?” The creature stared at her blackened and knobbly feet, “Oh! The Judgement! Oh, darling I’m so sorry, but it looks like the game is up for you! They’re coming to get you luv!” It whined some more, then came the Seven of Cups.

“Hemmmh, well now, there’s confusion in your near future sweetness,” I informed her in my most compassionate voice, “perhaps that’ll be your trial? Haha!”

I paused to watch her squirm a little.

“So, now let’s draw your *self card*,” I emphasised, as she was unlikely to remember the order of the spread, but what comes out only the Star. Now pausing as though for effect I was actually thinking how to talk my way out of this one, I should have taken that card out of the deck. “Em, er, yes, hemmmh.”

The creature’s eyes darted up to meet my gaze with inquisitive optimism like those of a child promised uncursed candy. “The hope card!” it trilled.

“Erm, yes,” I retorted, “that means there’s no hope for you!”

Confidently, I drew her next card as her eyes sank back to the floor dejectedly. “This is your environment and those around you,” I incanted with authority, and out came the Five of Swords which drew her renewed interest.

“Someone’s going to put one over on you luv, you need to be *extra* careful,” I cautioned, though she should know this already, I thought.

“These are your worst fears!” I continued.

Well, typically one draws this card to the incantation, “These are your hopes, fears and expectations,” but with Trianalaa Zerces I figured a more earthly interpretation might help the wretch, and right enough out came the Seven of Swords.

“The Thief!” She exclaimed in alarm.

“Oh, yes!” I confirmed, “Perhaps tomorrow or the next day you’ll meet a scoundrel, or that is your fear at least. Do you know any scoundrels Triana?”

“I don’t, Ezzie, but people pass on the road all the time! One a day, some days!”

“Ah sure Triana, we can’t dance our lives to the beat of the tune of the drum of our fears!” I lowed melodically, giving her my best consoling smile I usually reserve for paying clients. She was only getting *one* of those.

“And now let us see what is to come for you,” I declared and confidently intoned, “and this is what will come!” and I smacked down the final card, Judgement.

Oh, Judgement was resplendent in her nakedness, much like my new corporeal apparatus I had donated myself from the comely maiden of the village before departing.

“Wait Ezzie!” the battered old crone shrieked, “Judgement! We already had Judgement... she was my future tribulations!”

I glanced over the spread and realised that the auld fart was right, “Hemmmh.”

“Oh Ezzie, your deck has two Judgements!” Her tone of amused condescent didn’t sit well with me.

“YOU KNOW NOTHING OF THE TAROT!” I bellowed at her, which seemed to put her in her place.

Think quick now Ezzie!

“Oh, you’re in trouble now you are! Oh! Double Judgement! Ooooh! This has never happened before. Tell me luv, is your life assurance paid up?”

“Oh now Ezzie, that can’t be right!” she negotiated, “I want a clarifying card!”

“CLARIFYING CARD? CLARIFYING CARD? That costs extra!” I protested instinctively.

“Oh Ezzie, come on now, it’s just you and me... and I shared the medicine, and you’ve not gone blind... be kind Ezzie!”

“Oh, what the hell!” I thought, fine! If the silly cow wants a clarifying card I’ll give her a clarifying card!

So I closed my eyes and made my constipated face... the one that makes me look like I’m connecting to the astral plane for guidance. Then I swayed from side to side, briefly opening one eye to confirm that the stupid auld bat was falling for it, and right enough she was enraptured, her face a picture of delighted expectation in anticipation of her next card.

“I have to channel the astral energies!” I added.

“Ooooh, of course!” she trilled.

Then after a good thirty seconds, which I’ve always found is the right amount of time for the mark to feel a true sense of value, I reached up the sleeve of my blouse and palmed the Death card onto the top of the deck. That’ll show her!

Dramatically and with great aplomb I drew the card then, trying very hard not to break out into raucous laughter, I summoned my best sombre face

for the final delivery, turning the card dramatically in the air and now comes the gasp...

Now comes the gasp...

What's wrong?

"Oh! the Star again!" she squealed in delight.

"WHAAAT?"

I opened my eyes and right enough there was the Star! Another Star! The cow had two Judgements and two Stars and she was happy as a pig in shit, her arms all gesticulating up to heaven, like there was anyone she knew up there!

"What have ye done ya durty fecker? Death! Ya got DEATH!"

"She gazed up at me with sweetness and innocence and carefully elocuted with her most smarmy self-satisfied smile, "I got another Star, Ezzie! That's *very* good isn't it?"

Well I was incensed! It wasn't for her to be magicing the card up my sleeve into the Star! Where did the wrinkly auld sack learn that? Waves of cursing rage pulsed up my youthful plump body and the anger boiled like a pot of frothy giblets!

But I was outwardly calm, and I needed a drink of water because there was something stuck in my throat you see! So I feigned a little cough, visibly suppressed my minor annoyance and politely suggested that there might be some uncursed water about, which I wasn't normally given to drink the filthy stuff, not medicinal at all, but you see I might have something caught in my throat, perhaps the bitter aftertaste of the lesson that you taught me, and with me so deserving of your chiding and trickery and deceit, me who just gave you a millennial grade Tarot reading that I'd normally charge two bitcoins for! And her fetid game had come to its conclusion. That was it you see, that was all she wanted... just to show me up!

"Ah Ezzie, don't be like that, I'll go get you a nice cool drink of uncursed water from the well!"

“Oh that would be so kind of you Mme. Trianalaa Zerces! You’re so very kind. Perhaps that’s what the Seven of Cups came out of the deck to tell us, perhaps it foreshadowed my urgent need of a cool drink of water and your going and gettin’ it for me like the kind soul that you are! So kind!”

She beamed a conceited, victorious smile and with great effort and much grunting struggled to her misshapen feet, picking up a large wooden ladle that had been under her all the time before righting herself and wobbling off to the door of the barn in an unintentionally serpentine motion as she reacquainted herself with the force of gravity after these many years. As she got closer to the door the billygoat tethered outside bleated angrily and appeared to try to bite her, eliciting a sprightly kick of her right foot, narrowly missing his head, which made the goat jump up and down angrily and struggle against its restraint that tethered it to the door frame. First it would kick up on its hind legs then it’d kick up on its front legs and thrust its hind legs against the barn making a dreadful clatter then it’d lower its head to charge at the infernal old hag but it couldn’t get further than the length of its rope, though not being far from taking the door of the barn off with it and I’d have to say that’d be a merry sight, him, the bleating billy goat dragging the red door frame of the barn around the place while trying to get a bite out of his tormenter for whom he had a bitter vengeance!

The well looked dilapidated, and I couldn’t help but notice that it had no winch, a condition that seemed to evoke much profane annoyance in the good Mme. Zerces as she leaned over the crumbling stone wall and reached into the well shaft ostensibly to grab hold of something, and with more cussing she puled at a rotting hemp rope and, hand over hand, she hoisted it up ’till appeared a black, leaking wooden bucket that she set atop the stones and into this she plunged her wooden ladle quickly as the water therein was clearly dispersing itself on the ground at her feet. Then, with a pugnacious vitriol she gave the bucket a belt of her fist and it clattered down the well shaft again.

By now I’d gathered my layers and tottered over to the door to watch this spectacle for its entertainment value, and when she approached the barn again the dimwitted old fool was expending all her limited capacity to

hold the ladle up level to preserve the greenish brown water cupped therein, and that is where she found me. Raising the ladle for me to take, she said daintily, "There we go Ezzie, a nice drop of water for you, to help your throat and refresh your gentle spirit!"

So I reached out to the ladle and didn't my arthritis flare up, right then and there, and in getting hold of the long wooden handle I couldn't quite maintain my grip of it and didn't the greasy auld thing slide right through my grasp and I was mortified, says I, "Oh, kind Mme. Trianalaa Zerces," with a broad and pleading smile, "my arthritis is troubling me today, oh dear, your kind gift of refreshment has escaped my grasp and spent itself on the ground, and I did so much need that drink of water, did I, oh I shouldn't want to ask you to go to all that trouble again... hemmmh."

The auld bat fixed me with a stern, impatient look and quickly snatched the wooden ladle back, turned tentatively so as not to lose her balance, raised it to the billygoat saying, "Get outta me way ya cursed wretch!" and began her trek back to the well, brandishing the ladle upside-down in front of her and mumbling unhappily.

Now I had a little time to kill as the good Mme. Trianalaa Zerces refilled the ladle and I happened to look down at my feet to check *them* for arthritis too, for it's very uncommon it should flare up on me like that, very unlucky indeed! And what do I see only the billygoat, having been perturbed from his slumber, and having had another jump about, had this time settled to the other side of the door, perchance there to find some respite, but had inadvertently stretched the rope across the entrance in doing so. Now one can't blame the billygoat for this, though it *is* a flagrant violation of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act for which I wanted neither myself nor the kind Trianalaa Zerces to be guilty. Noticing that the wood at the bottom of the door frame had rotted some and then most carelessly been painted over... oh this wouldn't do! I lowered myself a little to see that the rope restraining the poor demented creature was loosely tied about a foot up off the floor so, in an effort to help, I set about making the situation safe. I gave a pull on the loose end of the rope and it untangled itself and fell to the ground, now pooled around the post and no

longer taut at ankle level across the door... in other words, I had neutralised the hazard.

Then there was a tremendous roar from the direction of the well! Hadn't the silly auld coot dropped the bucket half ways and was trying to catch it back up again without losing the water. Well, I felt it was my duty to help, so I raised my skirt an inch to traverse a small mucky puddle and go to the aid of my companion, when I accidentally stomped on the billygoat's short tufty tail! Oh there was a commotion! The poor thing leaped up and was kicking out at back and charging at front, not at all certain what had happened, but pointing himself in the general direction of his resident tormenter who was cussing and cursing down the well and then didn't the unexpected happen! A sudden gust of wind took up off the sea in the south and blew so fiercely up the side of the barn, over the field and around the posterior of Mme. Trianalaa Zerces that her tatty soiled green tartan skirt was thrust right up over her haunches and the dirty auld cow wasn't even wearing knickers! I didn't have time to laugh at this, as there was then a creaking noise as the billygoat's rope caught under the door frame, pulling it away and coming loose again as he continued his maniacal dance, alternating between kicking out back and charging out front... only this time when he charged out front, well, he didn't stop, nor even hesitate, nor even seem to notice that he had been liberated from his former incarceration, no, he just kept going, first toward the gate but then tracing a majestically broad ark, bleating like a daemon liberated from hell and just as his curly horns were aimed right at the bare buttocks of the eminent and knickerless Mme. Trianalaa Zerces who was presently dividing her attention between hoisting the bucket, cursing quite prolifically now, and with her remaining hand, trying to get a hold of her putrid green tartan skirt so as to preserve her modesty... well at that moment the billygoat seemed to like what he saw, turned his sweeping arc into a line straight as the road to Dublin and I counted seven tremendous thuds of his hooves on the ground before he made a splendid impact with, and upward thrust into, the splayed buttocks of the eminent Madame. In an ungainly flurry of legs and green tartan, didn't he upend her right into the well where her impressive girth could not rival that of the shaft and she disappeared in a howling scream, "Ezzieeeeeee!"

* * *

The next morning I'd had my fill of turnips and a peaceful night's sleep. I found the pungent auld bag's medicine stash and I solemnly inspected each bottle. Of the ten she possessed, one had too much paraffin and one had a rat in it and so I lightly cursed the remaining eight and packed them in my satchel.

Now, I could have had a good life here. And the auld billygoat was looking much better after the excitement of last night and could well supply companionship and be the founding member of a herd in time, supplying cheese for atop my turnips, and the snivelling drone from the well would cease in a few days, "Ah Ezzie, help me up Ezzie, please! I'll share the medicine with you!" So I got my turnip knife and went to the well where I caught hold of and cut the rope dropping it down atop the auld hag which somewhat changed the timbre of her whining and, vowing to put that distasteful evening behind me forever I fetched Sally and resumed my adventure. Go Zxeronna!

THREE

My millennial took me to the beach yesterday, it was blazing hot and I got sunburnt in my clefts. I do love him so, his name is Jamesie Millennial, and of all the consorts I've had, I think I like this one the best, also he has lots of bitcoins. He likes to be coy about that, but one day I'm going to find them. They're not under the bed or in any of his closets or drawers or the attic, but one day when I find the right medicine to make him good and compliant I'll use a light cursing to sedate his inhibitions and he'll lead me right to them.

The way we met wasn't consensual. You see one day I was between corporeal apparatuses, and I was having a little rest on the astral plane. I'd found this nice quiet field of daffodils all blowing in the warm breeze and I thought I'd have a good long nap and maybe the daemons wouldn't find me if I didn't snore too loud, dreadful pest they are, seems the minute I retire to the astral plane for a bit of a break from the millennials they're at me about all those promises I made to Satan and how they're all overdue. So there was I, basking in the astral sun, and along floats this stupid millennial, buck naked, wrapped in a long garland of lotus flowers, oleander and purple chrysanthemums all wrapped around him like a dress, and I just thought, "Ah Jaysus, would ya look at this gobshite!"

So he's having a go at flying around but he's not doing very well, then of course, just my luck, doesn't he see me, and a big stupid smile crosses his face... flipping millennials, and then he's half flying, half bounding over to me like some kind of brain-damaged border collie and he plants himself face-first in the daffodils not five foot in front of me. "Watch where you're going ya dipstick!" I shout at him, his imbecilic garland now all bunched

up around his shoulders, his arse jiggling around obscenely in the air, his head stuck in the flowers like toffee, as can only happen on the astral plane, but it's happening right now in front of me, fecking millennials, and I just wanting some peace! So I reach out and set the eejit upright where he plonks down on his arse, legs folded in front of him and a dopey grin all across his face and, as though it couldn't get worse, doesn't he start talking, oh Jaysus, save me from these millennials! They're all over the astral plane now, 'cos they're all meditating and getting in touch with their millennial feelings... it's not going to end well.

"Greetings, fair lady!" it intones loftily with a self-important look of glee.

"Ah, Jaysus, what do you want? I'm just here for a rest and I didn't need you, stupid millennial, barging in and wanting to know all the secrets of how to *ascend* or *activate the pineal gland*! Come visit me in the physical plane and bring a few bitcoins and we'll talk, but right now I'm just here for a bit of a kip before taking my next corporeal apparatus!"

The millennial is undeterred. Beaming the warmest, most loving smile, (you couldn't make this up) he's been working on his *heart energy* he says, and the vortex of love and peace swirling around his tits would take your eye out if you weren't careful!

"So where are you from then?" I ask him, since I clearly wasn't going to get any peace for the moment.

"I'm from the physical plane!" declares he, "And tonight I'm venturing to the astral to meet my soul guide!"

Now at this point it's all I can do to not burst out laughing at this pillock but then doesn't he come out with this gem, "Are *you* my soul guide?"

I can't hold it in any longer as I'm consumed in a fit of hysterical laughter and I close my eyes and roll over on my back to laugh at the sky 'till I nearly lose my lunch. Then, when I manage to compose myself, I pat down my dress and change the fabric from little red poppies to pure white and I fix him with a stern glare, but isn't he floating six feet off the ground pretending to be a butterfly and all these other butterflies, they're all fluttering around him and he's laughing like a little girl and his garland is all waving about and not at all concealing his modesty and while I know

this is just about the funniest thing I've seen in a millennium or so, well, I've had my laugh. I grab him by the ankle and yank him rudely back down to the ground where he squashes a majestic bunch of daffodils and there he sits again like a twat with the big smile still on his face.

"Well, it might be as I *am* your soul guide, what's in it for me?" says I.

"Oh, I'm so delighted... no... honoured to meet you," it burbles, "I've been searching and searching, but I never gave up hope of finding you... I have so many questions!"

I wave my hand in a gesture of 'shut up' and he does so, still with the radiant smile that is strangely bigger than his face now staring up at me pleadingly.

"Well, now, erm, tell me a little about your physical life... do you have the bitcoins?"

Well, after some cross-examination, it turns out that the little twerp not only has a house and a motor vehicle but also he works in the Net Curtains, and that can only mean one thing, when he farts, the bitcoins come out! More bitcoins than I could earn reading the Tarot from here to the Age of Capricorn!

"Right ho!" says I, "How would you like to know your life's purpose?" Haha! Now I got him!

His countenance brightened further than I thought possible and he replied with great excitement, "Oh, yes venerable soul guide, my life's purpose is of great interest to me and if you could elucidate..."

"Yeah, yeah, okay, shut up luv!" says I, "Just be quiet and go over there," I gesture to the far side of the field, ignoring his consternation at seeing nothing over there, as there actually *was* nothing over there yet, "and, em... there's a, em... *millennial vortex of truth and purpose!* Yes, that's it! And just sortof... jump into it and you'll find your life's purpose luv!"

Without so much as a nod of appreciation, off he went, bobbing along through the daffodils leaving a trail of destruction in his wake as he searched for the promised millennial vortex of truth and purpose. Meanwhile I dropped a summoning curse and to my right, in a patch of

scorched daffodils, appeared an ugly black rabbit with ungainly floppy ears and a sour disposition to which I lowered myself and whispered, “Tell the big man I’m sending him part payment in the form of one stupid millennial, but I need the corporeal apparatus back so I can, em... continue his work!”

Then, being left in peace finally I reclined and basked in the warm sun as the smell of sulphur cleared and the screaming grew more distant, and drifted off to a peaceful refreshing sleep. Next morning didn’t I wake up in a big bed in a suburban three bed semi and promptly I reached under the covers to explore my new corporeal apparatus. Well it had all the bits I expected, and somewhat more around the middle and, as I was contemplating this, didn’t a vision of beauty appear carrying a stenching pot of black coffee, and so I met Jamesie Millennial. He was the icing on the cake, I didn’t expect that! All I wanted was the house and the motor vehicle and the bitcoins, but didn’t I fall on my feet and acquire a millennial consort into the bargain!

Now, at first I had to be rather careful, because I had just been instrumental in helping his millennial companion... em... find his life’s purpose. This purpose, it turns out, was to donate his corporeal apparatus to Mme. Esmerelda Zxeronna, but I couldn’t just blurt this out you see, I had to play the long game, and so came many months of drinking this vile black fluid. “Oh Jamesie Millennial, you make the best coffee in the Five Counties, you do!” And being dragged around to art galleries, tea gardens and even a Vegan Sandwich Company! Feckin’ millennials, cursin’s too good for them if you ask me! “Oh Jamesie Millennial, you have such laudable taste in art and tea and sandwiches, I do so love you Jamesie Millennial!” Now, he suspected something was up, but he eventually came to like me better than my predecessor so one day I just out and told him, “Sit down, shut up, and Mme. Zxeronna will read your Tarot! It’s not free mind!” and we just sort of went from there!

I hitched my dress up around my haunches and we paddled through the water around some big rocks to a private stretch of beach and the millennial produced some fizzy pink plonk, ‘frizzante’ he called it, tasted like horse piss but it did calm the nerves. Then there was mai tai and I

says to Jamesie Millennial, “Well if this is *mai tai*... where’s *your tai*?” and we fell about the place laughing and my arse got all sand up in the crack and I had to hitch up my dress again and go for a dip in the sea to wash it out. Now that the mai tai had gone to my head, I slipped out of my swimming knickers to feel the fresh cool seawater in my vital places, then waved them about in the air, laughing with glee, and the millennial and I was skinny dipping for an hour or more.

Sometimes at night when I’m drifting off to the astral plane I see visions of angry angels. Never understood that. The trick is to shout out, “Is that you God? I’M SORRY!” then, if he’s playing by the rules, he can’t send me to hell as I’ve repented and, as I’ve mentioned I’m 83,597½ years old, so if they’re thinking of waiting me out, well, they’ve got a challenge! That’s the funny thing about being a great healer, the moral grey area impinges on one’s daily experience more than is popularly understood. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go make some green medicine for my millennial consort who’s come home a little upset. Seems the local millennial wine boutique didn’t have any of his favourite Roda! What *is* the world coming to?

FOUR

I awoke from the most horrible dream! Well, I say I *awoke* but really, when a non-corporeal entity like me wakes up, it's more of a *transition* from the astral plane. I *used to* wake up though, back when I was growing up in Ballyhoomoloney, and I never remember enjoying it. My sister Philladora would have burned the pig's liver for breakfast or Daddy would have gotten his head stuck in the half-door again, and it was rarely a rewarding experience.

However, one good thing about waking up these days is that Jamesie Millennial is there, and then I have to go and make a millennial concoction called *pour-over coffee*. I had a different name for it that also begins with 'p' but the millennial berated me, as they are wont to do.

So one takes the cone and places inside it a piece of paper the shape of a little hat like what Enoch MacCurtin used to wear when he was playing the witch in the Ballyhoomoloney Players production of Macbeth they used to put on in the town square on Thursdays. Now there was a number of problems with that, you see the square was actually a rectangle, and the Mayor, a dumpy little sprat called Seán Óg McGrath would be touchy about that because the square in Ballymuckstones was actually shaped square and the one in Ballycumlonely was round for a while after the big storm, but they got some rocks and made a square in the middle and we was the only town in the Five Counties that had a square but the square was a rectangle, and worse than that, it was shorter on one long side than on the other long side and the only way to make it even a proper rectangle would have been to tear down Cormac Quinn's law office and redraw it, but seeings as he was a solicitor, the planning board never could best him,

and eventually the town ran out of money to commit to the effort. Then the library burned down in the flood of '22 and the book was destroyed and the only play they'd learned was Macbeth, and I hadn't learned to write yet so all they ever could perform was that one cursed play. If the Toba Volcano hadn't gone and erupted I'm quite sure they'd perform *my* book, when it would be finished I mean.

Now you can't just buy the good Aldi coffee for the millennial you see, no, no, that doesn't work and he'd know the difference in a heartbeat. It has to be Kenyan *washed* coffee grown above fourteen hundred metres high, a metre being the length of a heifer's tail in autumn, so that's pretty high, which is very important. Then you have to put the boiling water in the paper, which absolutely must be Japanese and unbleached and you throw in the coffee and out comes this sickly smelly brown water like the bathwater after the annual Ballyhoomoloney Spring Bathing Festival we'd have in the bandy rectangle on the first Sunday every March.

"Ooooh! Ezzie, that stuff stinks to high heaven!" the millennial coos.

That's unusual now! Normally he comes out with some tripe like, "Did you remember to weigh the water?" to which I respond, "yeeees!" thus satisfying the important inquiry.

"It's supposed to stink Jamesie, its your favourite Kenyan, 1500 metres above sea level, fermented and washed, and I gave it an extra rinse, just to be sure! I put it on your bill."

"Ooooooh! Thank you Ezzie, I'm sure it's delicious!"

"Well, yes Jamesie it *is* delicious! Didn't I just explain that! Didn't I just get outta' bed in the freezing cold to go grinding and boiling and stirring so you'd have your morning coffee, didn't I?"

"You boiled it?"

"Erm, no, that'd be wrong wouldn't it? Erm, ninety-five degrees, is that proper Jamesie?"

"Erm... yeeees!"

Something wasn't right here!

“Erm me arse! Who are you?”

“Jamesie!”

And so began the worst morning of my life to date. Little did I know a great misfortune was befalling me. A greater misfortune than the time Daddy caught me canoodling 'round back of the cow shed with Billy Murphy and I was supposed to be down the market selling the turnips that were already going off 'cos hadn't I been too busy doing Tessa O'Donovan's Tarot. The auld bat wanted to branch out into the Angel Cards. I suspect she was having a bit of difficulty relating to the fact that her husband was more interested in getting into Sally Maguire's knickers through a process of bribery using fermented curds that he should properly have been feeding to the pigs and Tessa was very fond of bacon and fearing that none of this boded well for the future, she sought, as is right and proper, the counsel of the Tarot. After an encounter with the Devil card she demanded I draw a clarifying card, and I says to her, “Now Tessa, don't be at me y'auld scrounger, don't y'know the clarifying card costs extra?” to which she had the audacity to reply, “Well I'll pay you extra when hell freezes over, or when those pigs out back fly around the house in circles singing Ave Maria in consonant harmony, or...” she paused, grinning like a cat with gas.

“Or *what* Tessa O'Donovan?” shouted I, ill-advisedly.

“*When*, Ezzie, one of your clarifying cards actually manages to cast any clarity, illumination, elucidation or edification on any bloody question I've ever asked of you y'auld crone!”

And that was it. The room turned red and over went the soup kettle and Garda Hannifin was called, but seeing as his donkey was tired I had time to get away when she had to go answer a knock at the front door from Lilly Duffy-Rooney who had come on behalf of the milkman to collect for the week. Hadn't the auld bitch locked the dutch door 'round back but being dim and irate as she was, she'd only locked the bottom half and I had a medal for the pommel horse in the Ballyhoomoloney Games of '17 and sure didn't I just vault right over! Took her an hour to realise I was gone, then on the way down the Muck Road I met Garda Hannifin who'd gotten a puncture on Quigley's Corner and I told him there was nothing to

worry about and that if he'd drop 'round on Thursday I'd give him a reading for free, being the upstanding public servant he was and looking a bit peaky to boot and sure after that he was no more interested in Tessa O'Donovan's lunatic rantings that I had done her 'damages' for the nettle soup she was making that would only have given her the trots anyhow and had brought the floor up cleaner than I'd ever seen it in all my visits 'cos Tessa O'Donovan wasn't wining any housekeeping contests but needed no help being regular. The same could not be said about Garda Hannifin who, having had his 'free' Tarot reading, and remarkably enough needing a clarifying card, which we know is expensive, was advised by the Tarot to have a colonoscopy. The next week he looked much better but wouldn't tell me what they'd found even as I assured him I was asking only out of professional interest and for reference in future consultations, and Dr. Mulligan, the quack at the far end of Main Street assured me he couldn't release the medical records in the matter as Garda Hannifin had them sealed under the State Secrets Act, which I thought was not very sporting of him, but I would have done the same, being him, if the rumours about him were even half true. Dr. Mulligan did, however, pay my referral fee without quibble or delay which was most unlike him and thus the matter was closed and I got on with business.

Tessa O'Donovan was advised by Cormac Quinn that such a case would be hard to prove as she'd cleaned up the soup and the third leg on the soup kettle was wonky to begin with and so she proposed a settlement. I was to learn the Angel Cards so that Tessa O'Donovan's readings would be nonthreatening in future, provide a sample reading, then two free readings, with a clarifying card thrown in for good measure and she wouldn't sue for the mental anguish caused to herself or her dog, Wombat, who was warming himself perilously close to the fire when the soup kettle suffered its unfortunate upending, without prejudice, though I don't know what that last bit means, but Cormac Quinn was always saying, "without prejudice," I suspect he didn't know either.

"What the feck do you want?"

The millennial was ashen. Oh no, I've done it again!

“Sorry Jamesie, I’m sorry, I was just thinking my thoughts, you know, I didn’t mean to shout. But seriously thought, what do you want?”

He waved his glass in the air. I filled it again from the carafe. That’s what they call a jug you see.

“Thank you so very much, Ezzie the Lezzie!”

“WHAT DID YOU SAY?” roars I, somewhat taken aback. Now that brings back memories, oh no!

“Who are *you*?”

“I’m Jamesie!”

“NO YOU’RE NOT!”

It titters.

“Yes, I *am*, Ezzie. Just Jamesie, your millennial consort. Jamesie.”

“Oh, Mother of Divine Mercy, what the feck are *you* doing here? Didn’t I push you... erm... didn’t you fall down a well?”

“You pushed me?” the thing asked pitifully.

“No, no, I just said that you fell. Well, didn’t the billygoat push you down? Didn’t he?”

“Oh, well *I* don’t know what happened Ezzie! I was just reaching into the well with my wooden ladle to retrieve a refreshing draught of uncursed water for you when I heard a clomping behind me and I was upended arse over teakettle and plummeting down the well! It was a long way down Ezzie, and it was very dark and wet at the bottom, being a well as it is, and I called out for you to help me but either you didn’t hear... or you didn’t understand,” it snivelled.

“I don’t know what you were doing to that billygoat, but he was very angry with you!” I observed.

“That was Charlie, he was my companion animal!” it crooned.

“Well, maybe he wasn’t keen on the type of companionship you had in mind?” I speculated.

“You’ve been gone a very long time now Ezzie! Surely you must have been able to get help by now?”

“?”

“You said you’d go to get help in the village!”

“That doesn’t sound like something I’d say!”

“You *did* Ezzie!”

“Erm, yes, I remember now luv, you see they didn’t want to help you!”

“Oh!” it whined despondently, “because of the incident!”

“Yes! Remind me, what was the character, context and import of that incident?”

“Erm, no.”

The postman walked past the window. He wasn’t aware that he was dragging behind him an astral entity that was attached to his thorax harvesting his juicy vital energies. I waved to Teddy who cheerfully waved back but the postman didn’t notice me.

“Darling, how exactly did you get *out of* the well?”

“Oh, I’m still *in* my well! It’s much bigger down here than you’d expect and there’s ample supply of sphagnum moss! It gives me gas, but it’s very good for the skin!”

“Must be cold?”

“Geothermal energy!”

“Lonely?” I persist.

“Time to spare to read the Oracle cards!”

“Yes, of course, the Oracle cards! But my question was, how did you get *out*?”

“The 4G!”

“Come again?”

“The 4G!”

I readjusted my expectations of the interaction and pursued the issue further, “Well, Jamesie and I, we have the 5G. It’s new! We use it to get on the Net Curtains for the you-vision-tube. The world moves on luv and, being stuck down a well I suppose... WAIT! What about the 4G?”

“So, it was a Saturday afternoon. It’s always Saturday afternoon in the well you see, and I was reading the Oracle cards, the ones I invented, The Oracle of the Illuminating Light!”

“Illuminating light? What *other* sort of light is there exactly luv?”

“Erm... well, this kind of light is *illuminating*, and I was meditating on the Honey Bee card and...”

“The Honey Bee card? Ha! Mother of Divine Mercy!”

“Yes, Ezzie, the Honey Bee card symbolises our connection to the ephemeral nature of life’s experiences and the inevitability of change coupled with the compelling need to pursue our best interests even as we perceive the source of our sustenance moving hither and tither.”

“Is that so?”

“And intertrigo,” it added, “that’s a kind of rash!”

“Is that so?”

“And during my meditation I heard a high-pitched buzzing!”

She stared vacantly upward as though captivated by the very memory of this buzzing sound.

“Go on luv,” I encouraged, in the hope that some end was in sight.

“And as the buzzing rose further in pitch I noticed a modulation... do you know what a modulation is Ezzie?”

“Yes luv,” I lied.

“And as I listened, I could began to *see* the patterns in the signal! Ezzie... it was *beautiful*!”

The creature’s eyes glazed over and it stared far off into the air and a thin thread of drool formed on the corner of its mouth before being wiped away by the back of a grubby hand. Well, it was Jamesie’s hand really, but

what inhabited it was fetid, and it drawled, “*So* beautiful Ezzie! Like *you* in your night slip that time we stayed at the motel on the way back from the cabbage growers’ Cailín Álainn pageant in Ballykettle cross in ’03!”

“NO! No, darling, that didn’t happen! Now stop that nonsense and tell me about this bumblebee signal of yours.”

“Honey bee, Ezzie! It’s a honey bee! The bumblebee is bigger, rounder and more hairy than the honey bee, but my card is about the honey bee because it relates to our connection to the ephemeral nature of life’s experiences and the inevitability of change coupled with the compelling...”

“Yes, thank you darling, now if we could just get back to the small issue of your unfortunate confinement down the well?”

“I built a hydroponic garden!”

“Of course you did luv, now about this signal of yours.”

“Oh, yes, thank you for reminding me Ezzie. You see as I was meditating, my astral body loosened from my corporeal apparatus and became entangled in the modulations within the signal! It’s the 4G Ezzie... it’s full of pictures of cats and what look like confidential bank details, both of which my astral body is attracted to... my spirit animal is a cat you see Ezzie!”

“Bank details you say?”

“And I became entangled in the 4G and got sucked up and out of the well! Next thing I knew I was soaring majestically over the grassy hills of Ballycumlonely.”

“But hold on luv, how *old* are you?”

“Not nice Ezzie!”

“You’re ten thousand years older than me! You don’t *need* help from cats and bank details and 4G to go to the astral plane or soaring about the grassy mounds of Ballycumlonely. What am I missing?”

“Well, it’s odd you should mention that Ezzie because I *tried* that! The moment I got out of the well I tried to come see you but when I went west

I came back to the well from the east, and when I tried going north I ended up in Eddie Rockets in Ballymuckstones, and when I went into the ladies' room there I popped out on the Magic Road down by Ryan's field, then when I made a run for the county border I didn't even get as far as Annie Brody's burlesque and massage parlour but I was overcome by a blackness and suddenly I was back down the well!"

"Oh my! That was unfortunate!"

"It's more than just unfortunate Ezzie, there's a powerful confusion spell over the land! It must be wreaking havoc across the Five Counties! It's a very powerful spell Ezzie! Luckily for me I can penetrate the spell by riding in the modulations of the 4G signal!"

"Imagine what you could do with a 5G signal, like me and Jamesie have! Speaking of which, you must be tired, why don't you go have a lie down!"

"How can I lie down at a time like this Ezzie, I'm on the cusp of freedom... *you* can find who cast the spell and figure out a way to lift it!"

"Can I now? Hmmm! You credit me with a lot don't you?"

"But Ezzie, you're a powerful spell master, I know... you told me! Surely you'll give it a try! Once the spell is lifted you can bring a long rope and rescue me from the well!"

"Well, I suppose I *could* do that! But it's a busy week for me you see luv! The millennial needs more za'atar and I have a website now, on the Net Curtains, Jamesie made it for me, it's very powerful!"

"Ooooooh! Ezzie! You're truly a lady of means! You're *magnetic*!"

Magnets! As if we don't have enough problems!

"You know I don't like magnets!" I protested, "Magnets is the work of the devil, and you know that!"

"You'll *try*? Won't you Ezzie?"

The creature stared longingly up at me and chewed its teeth, its face contorted and wrinkled in pleading agony.

"Of course luv," I conceded, "I'll do my best to find you!"

FIVE

Three boxes of za'atar! Well, better safe than sorry I suppose. I slam the spice drawer closed and move on to the next one. My search has been an arduous three hours now, and the millennial gets home soon.

There's a few things I've learned about the modern millennial that have lubricated my relationship with mine. First off, you must not run out of za'atar, *and* you have to put it on *everything* from poached eggs to cheese on toast, if it doesn't have za'atar on it, you're out of luck. If you can't find za'atar then you have a problem, and your best bet is to obtain sumac which is the only acceptable substitute. In the event that you can find neither, then you must use sweepings from the dustpan, sprinkling liberally, and *claim* that they're za'atar which will invariably work as the modern millennial is as dim as it is discerning.

Now I've exhausted the drawers in the kitchen, it's time to move on to the bedroom. The first drawer gets us off to a frightening start, the less said about that the better, and it's all downhill from there. There's more underwear here than in your average Penneys, and most of it is more expensive! Still no haul though. Under the bed, top of the wardrobe, I even pulled the felt off the bottom of the bedside lamp and unscrewed the one on the ceiling, still nothing!

Oh yes, another very important thing to remember is that you mustn't *trigger* the millennial. That's very bad. A triggered millennial can cancel you faster than an angry donkey can chase you into a ditch, and such a cancelling can last all day until the millennial relents upon requiring more za'atar to relieve withdrawal symptoms.

Still, finicky as the millennials are, mine, the one called Jamesie, has some endearing qualities, if one has a mind to be generous, and I'm quite fond of him, and his bitcoins.

Ah, that's another thing to remember, all millennials have the bitcoins though most of them deny it, they're rolling in them. They're good at hiding them too. Which brings me to the water tank. Brushing away thick, sticky cobwebs, I lift the cover and peer in. This is the only place left in the entire house and I *know* the bitcoins are in here! It's dark, wet, which I suppose I should have expected, and the light of my torch doesn't get to the bottom, but I know bitcoins sparkle like diamonds, and all I can see is a dead pigeon so I drop the lid and start back down the ladder. Foiled again! I *will* find those bitcoins, but not today. It's time to make millennial dinner: mapo tofu, but I'm out of doubanjiang so I have to use more za'atar.

"Hello Jamesie, did you have a good day?" Millennials delight in thinking you care. It looks a bit sullen today.

"... and I'm sure I ordered the Kenyan natural but they served me the washed Columbian..." the noise continues for some minutes, "... and all this mess, what have you been doing here?"

"Mess?" I must have been listening after all, "Oh, don't mind that, I was just cleaning."

The millennial continued droning on about the vagaries of its day.

"Jamesie?" I interrupt, using Stephen's voice, "I need an operation on my nipples or I'll die!"

The millennial looks suitably shocked but, before it can continue its rantings, I conclude, "But it's alright though, because all I need is one shiny bitcoin to pay for it and then I'll be right as rain again. But you've had a hard day, here have some mapo tofu... it's got extra za'atar, I'll go get a bitcoin... erm... remind me again where we keep them?"

"They're in the basement," the millennial lies.

"We don't have a basement Jamesie!" I retort.

The millennial now looks very sullen, almost like a millennial who *isn't* holding mapo tofu with extra za'atar.

"But if you don't care about me I suppose..."

"I gave them to Trianalaa," it muttered dejectedly.

"WHAT?"

"Mme. Trianalaa Zerces," it clarified.

"I know *that* Jamesie! Why would you do such a thing?"

"She prescribes my medicine and energetic healing regimen on the astral plane!" the millennial whines.

"Jamesie, *I* prescribe your medicine and energetic healing regimen on the astral plane!" I patiently outline to the millennial.

"Yes, but she's better at it and my rash has cleared right up!"

"That was a minor side effect Jamesie! You have to stop talking to that woman, she's dirt Jamesie, pure filth, fetid, rotten filth!"

"Don't talk like that about Mme. Zerces!" the millennial cries, slamming the bowl on the counter and holding its head in its hands.

Oh no, I've triggered it, I've got to be quick now, "Oh, no Jamesie, you've done nothing wrong, it's just that you don't know her like I do! She's *evil* Jamesie, you've got to be very careful. Don't give her any more bitcoins, please Jamesie!"

I put on my most empathetic smile and lift the millennial's bowl of steaming mapo tofu up and off to the side. Most millennials can't see what's right in front of them, so if you're showing them something you need to hold it off to the side and move it about. This eventually worked and the millennial acquiesced sullenly, but I still had a big problem.

"Did you give her *all* the bitcoins Jamesie?"

"Yes," it snivelled.

I had a big problem then!

* * *

“Hey Google! How do I block the 4G?”

“Open your phone’s Settings app. Tap Network & Internet, Internet...” the Google chirped happily pretending to be helpful.

“No, no, Google, STOP! Google I want to know how to block the 4G signal from coming at me through the Net Curtains.” One has to know how to speak to the Google.

“Do you want to know how to improve your 4G reception?”

“No! No dear, no. Block! I want to *stop* the 4G!”

All his little lights flickered as the Google applied his immense prowess to the task.

“Do you want to know how to block radio waves?”

“Yes! Yes okay Google, let’s try that... Hey Google, how do I...”

“A Faraday cage, named for its inventor Michael Faraday (1791 to 1867) is an enclosure used to block electromagnetic fields, composed of a continuous covering of conductive material or mesh.”

Ah, so, the Google has hit the nail on the head. “Very good Google! Can you get me one on Ali Express? About big enough to cover a millennial?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand,” chitters the Google evasively.

“I’m not asking you to pay luv! I just want to know where I can get one!”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

A quick trip to Ali Express on the Net Curtains and it turns out I can buy the stuff in rolls ten metres long. We’re in business! Go Zxeronna!

After four torturous weeks, along comes the van with the materials for my new Faraday cage. Now I got a ‘B minus’ in Home Economics back in my days as a girl, the first time I mean, in Ballyhoomoloney Girls’ Secondary School, Mrs. Wilson it was, so this shouldn’t be too taxing. Two hours later, and with a little help from the Google I had fashioned a majestic structure of 4G-blocking glory, perfectly sized for the containment of my millennial’s corporeal apparatus that would surely shield him from the evil influences of the fetid well-dweller of Ballycumlonely. So I go to the

kitchen and poach an egg, sprinkle it liberally with za'atar, hmmm, maybe a little sumac too for good measure and just as I hear the key in the lock I've installed the bait.

"Hello Jamesie! Welcome home, I've made you a light supper of eggs and za'atar, just the way you like it!"

"Ooooh, thank you Ezzie," it crows appreciatively, suspecting nothing, "and sriracha mayo?"

"Yes Jamesie! Sriracha mayo too," says I, rolling my eyes to heaven and hastily dashing to the fridge.

"What's this big shiny thing Ezzie?" the Millennial bellows from the back room.

"That's a... erm... special fort for you to eat your millennial dinner in! It'll keep out any evil influences!" I advise.

"Evil influences? You mean *you* can't come in?" the millennial chides, drawing on all his reserves of formulaic millennial humour, its head inside the opening of the tent sniffing about like a cautious animal.

"Well, *I* don't *need* to go in, Jamesie, but *you* do, it'll keep that putrid troublemaker from getting to you."

"You mean my friend Mme. Trianalaa? She's not a..." there was a 'splat' as the millennial landed face-fist in his poached eggs with za'atar and sumac, (somehow he got pushed) and I began to fasten the opening with safety pins.

"I don't like it in here!" the millennial informs me, thinking this information very important, "it's dark, and you forgot the Lao Gan Ma!"

"There's sumac, just eat it," I reply, losing some optimism as to how long he'll stay in there.

There was a slurping noise as the millennial inhaled his eggs with za'atar, sumac and sriracha mayo, then came, "I need my Steam Deck!" Ah! yes, I'd forgotten this, it's a surefire way to make a millennial sit near motionless for hours between servings of Rioja, "And I'm lonely. I miss Trianalaa!"

Partial win.

Next morning I awaken to the simpering drone of the fetid nemesis, “Helloooo Ezzie!”

I open one eye, fearing the worst, “WHO ARE YOU?” I inquire.

“You know who *I* am Ezzie! Jamesie broke out of the infernal contraption you locked him in, and I was waiting, haha!”

The trilling of the evil crone made my bile rise.

“I want to talk to Jamesie! Jamesie? Why didn’t you stay in your magic fort?”

“My Steam Deck ran out of battery,” Jamesie muttered sleepily, “and there was no Wi-Fi!”

Oh no! I’d miscalculated! The very technology that protected Jamesie from interference by the stinking hag riding in the 4G also kept out the Wi-Fi, and millennials need USB power to survive! Curses! How could I have forgotten that?

So, back to the drawing board we go, as I fire up the you-vision-tube, a place where millennials keep the sum total of human knowledge in the form of moving pictures, and three hours later, the millennial, sensing noon, had awoken and is peacefully playing his Steam Deck, a tidy white cable jutting out the top to provide the Wi-Fi.

“Jamesie? Are you cold Jamesie?”

There was silence as the millennial took the next three minutes to finish his level. I waited patiently because I knew that the early afternoon was the most at-risk time to trigger the millennial with helpful suggestions, and that could put me out of the game for days!

“A little,” replied the millennial.

“What? Oh, cold, yes, I’d forgotten, erm, here, I made you something to keep you warm and safe,” I gently inform him while brandishing the new millennial 4G-proof snodie I had fashioned close to his Steam Deck where his attention was still focused. I heard a volley of ‘bleep-bleep-bloop, bleep-bleep-bloop’, and, realising that I’d lost him again for ten or

more minutes I decided to close the deal quickly. At the risk of triggering him I pulled the snoodie over his head and worked it down until he could again see out the top. “I’m triggered!” the millennial whined as I manoeuvred his arms through the sleeves and he resumed his game.

“Now Jamesie, you have to keep the hood up, that’s where you’re most vulnerable to the 4G!” ‘Bleep-bleep-bloop, bleep-bleep-bloop’, replied the millennial’s Steam Deck.

Well, that at least would buy me some time to consider my options.

SIX

“Low washer fluid level? What the feck does that mean?” In my day the motor vehicle was a simple thing, it didn’t have ‘low washer fluid level’ and there was two motive gear ratios which you changed by pulling on the rope under the seat, and you had to be careful to always park atop a hill, just over the crest, so that you could start again when your Tarot reading was done. Luckily, Ballyhoomoloney has the most hills per capita in the Five Counties so this was rarely an inconvenience except to American tourists.

I’d piloted the motor vehicle a few times when Stephen fell asleep at the wheel, but the conveyance was already in motion at the time and I discovered now that the act of getting it moving was the hardest part, but I wan’t unprepared and had spent a good hour downloading the knowledge from the you-vision-tube, the Google being no help in the matter since I had yesterday offended him by calling him a useless good for nothing chattering piece of something-or-other, I forget now, though it was apt and deserved. Thus I knew that the numbers on the paddle in the centre were to be used in sequence, and ‘R’, being not a number, was to be avoided, as it meant *really fast* and thus was not required because my quarry wasn’t getting out of her dank well any time soon. This was a problem that had to be dealt with thoroughly and for good, not with undue haste.

The modern motor vehicle does not require a hill to start. Rather there is, contained within the motor itself, an angry daemon which one prods with a sharp metal spike inserted beneath the directional wheel. More often than not this creature does then in anger produce a flurry of sparks which ignites the petroleum and, contingent upon sensible input on the foot

controls, instigates the motion of the carriage. This feat accomplished, one need only work the directional controls and horn, which I proceeded to do in turn. Within minutes I had achieved a prodigious pace and steered the motor vehicle in the direction of my home town of Ballyhoomoloney on the border of Kerry and Leitrim.

For those erudite millennials (and is there any other kind?) who might unwisely argue that there *is* no border between Kerry and Leitrim I must elucidate. 83,597½ years ago when I was first born, the world was a different place. In the prior emanation of humanity we were a humble, happy, agrarian people who enjoyed the Tarot, the medicine, which we manufactured plentifully in a variety of colours and flavours, and turnips, of which we also had a good selection. The world was a smaller place, the Five Counties being sufficient for our needs. The rolling hills of Leitrim sustained ample herds of livestock, and Kerry, at the time, provided the best turnips, though Ballyhoomoloney later usurped that honour, producing the creamiest purple-topped specimens available, so we had a varied diet of multiple types of turnip and cheese. Every year we'd load up the motor vehicle with some modest comforts and perhaps a billygoat and take our yearly respite in Donegal, being the purpose of said place. Occasionally one of the townsfolk might be struck by inspiration to write a poem, or even a book, or otherwise develop fanciful notions about him- or herself and such agitators were promptly dispatched up to Dublin where they could trouble us no more. It was an idyllic existence and for this reason we refer to it as the *Golden Emanation* of humanity, or 'GE' for short. Regrettably in the year 10,760 GE didn't the Toba volcano go up, an extinction level event that caused me great inconvenience and upset. My daddy and sisters perished in Ballyhoomoloney along with Benny the clairvoyant pig, Daisy the cow and my beautiful sparkly Tarot dress that I always wore for Tessa O'Donovan's readings to respect her fanciful notion of being a VIP client, and on a Saturday when Billy Murphy would take me down the pub for a g&t in hopes I would later let him stick his hand up my sparkly outfit and jingle my jangley-wangalies, which is what he called my breasts.

Attentive readers will expect now an explanation of the fifth county, County Cavan, but I can only say that it isn't my favourite. Cavan is

where the Big Red Barn is located in a little hovel called Ballycumlonely and my aversion is that the turnips are vastly inferior, and also that it is where my arch-nemesis, the so-called ‘Madamme Trianalaa Zerces’ oozes about her daily existence in a nimiety of filth and lies. Regrettably this is also where I must now venture to put an end to her meddling in the affairs of me and my millennial consort Jamesie.

First though, I need to get my spell book from the rubble of my old house in Ballyhoomoloney, and yes, dear reader, it isn’t guaranteed that it will have survived all these years, but again I am compelled, you see, as the creature has informed me that a powerful confusion spell has been cast over the Five Counties. Only a very powerful healer could cast such a spell, and only for altruistic reasons. It happens that *I* am such a powerful healer and you must admit that it would be altruistic to contain the fetid Zerces wench down a well, as her billygoat had obliged us, and no responsibility attaches to me in that unfortunate happenstance, though the potential that she might be rescued by some unwitting fool, knowing not her deviant nature, was something that couldn’t be allowed. Whoever cast the confusion spell that has kept the malodourous trollop from escaping her mossy prison has done the world a great service, right up until the millennials invented the 4G and defeated what should have been a gifted solution.

I was getting close now, though two of the indicators on the control panel of the otherwise sturdy and velocious conveyance were illuminated and this concerned me as I didn’t want the daemon within the motor to be exhausted nor so angered as it would decline to reignite the reaction that fuelled the vehicle after my business in Ballyhoomoloney concluded. It was then I realised that there was another foreboding light, it was blue and flashing, and after some investigation it did appear to be coming from without the cabin of the motor vehicle. It was accompanied by an irritating high-pitched undulating shriek. Inspecting the mirror I discovered that the cacophony emanated from rearward as it revealed the presence of my other nemesis, the constabulary of the modern millennials, the *adraG*!

Casting my mind back to my viewing of the moving pictures earlier in the day, I moved the centre paddle from setting three to setting five to increase the speed of the motor vehicle and at the next turn I set my directional indicator to right-flashing but in actuality I piloted the vehicle to the left and then quickly into a side road. It worked! The angry screeching beast flew past in the mirror and after a minute I'd be ready to resume my search. I passed the time by admiring the most tremendously beautiful cherry blossom tree that was growing by the side of the breen into which I had flung the motor vehicle. Its strong knotty branches swayed a sublime rustling cloud of pink and I lowered the window to catch the smell of its sweet, almondy flowers, a scent which always reminded me of Billy Murphy after his bath on the third Sunday of May. What I got instead was a powerful bang of turnips. My curiosity was piqued and I twisted the metal spike, the faithful daemon cooperated and the motor vehicle sprung to life with a spluttering roar.

With the window down, I followed the road slowly and carefully as the blissful odour of turnips, the good purple kind, rose to a crescendo and then faded out. Looking down to my feet I found the arrester again and stomped on it as I had done to avoid the pigs... that time in Ballykettle cross when the fence by the market broke and Willy Brophy's heard spewed out into the road, and of course just now when I had avoided the adraG who were chasing me in the mirror.

Hmmmm! Trying all the settings on the centre paddle, I found the one that made the motor vehicle creep backward slowly until the cloying smell of turnips was titillating my senses to a high pitch of ecstasy. Stopping again, I looked to the right and there was a metal gate. It was shimmering and it looked strangely out of place, falling off its hinges and rusting as it was, no millennial would allow that, I thought, then I realised! The confusion spell! Of course! Excitedly I turned the motor vehicle and drove it at full speed through the gate which clattered under the wheels and promptly, where there was a field before, wasn't I beltin' down the Muck Road past Slattery's Dangle, up the Haunted Hill, past Tessa O'Donovan's back gate, and down the other side to Ballyhoomoloney!

Oh joy of joys! I'd found my home again! Then a weighty sadness stabbed me in the chest. Daddy! Oh, Daddy, I'm so sorry I abandoned you! And my sisters, Philladora, Doralada and Estralaada, I left ye all to die in the acrid falling ash of the Toba volcano! Oh, my beautiful Billy Murphy who'd put me on the back of his bike in my flowery dress on a bright Sunday morning for a jaunt down to Dangling Rock to caress my jangley-wangalies with Fr. Brophy cavorting around the back of the white boulder with that hussy Bláithín Ó Súilleabháin who worked down in the hotel by the slaughterhouse, and they didn't know we was there, and the one time we startled them, didn't Fr. Brophy, the wise old codger, make the sign of the cross as he lowered his hand to rest on Bláithín's head, for her head was exactly where he wanted it and, pretending not to see us, intoned haughtily, "Child of God I absolve you of your sins and return your soul to the Lord for eternity," then consenting to notice us, with a sly smile, bid us good morning, hurrying away the both of them, Bláithín's bright yellow dress still stuck in the band of her knickers, thinking we, the oblivious fools were only out picking daisies for I always had a few of those in my hat on a Sunday morning for just such a deception. We laughed so hard that the sheep in the next field scurried away exclaiming 'Baaaah! Baaaah!' which was ironic as they had less to worry about now that Fr. Brophy had scampered off in the direction of Molly's Meander with Bláithín Ó Súilleabháin, his 'little lemon tartlet' in tow.

A tear moistened my left eye and I slowed the motor vehicle for I needed to compose myself before the disdainful task of searching the ruins of my home for the spell book which hopefully would contain the necessary incantations to navigate the confusion spell so I could put all this behind me again and resume my comfortable life with my millennial consort back in the city. I rounded Quigley's Corner and started up the long road to the house. The cows were nibbling the grass in the west field, and Daddy's big blue plough was stuck akilter, its ploughshare lodged in the stony soil where it had likely hit a boulder. The oxen, too dim to realise, would have pulled it along until it protruded upward at this obscene angle. Its fresh coat of glossy blue paint reminded me of the times I helped Daddy in spring. Annually, the farm tools were dragged out of the barn, repaired as necessary, and slathered in red oxide primer from Nolan's oil shop where

every year Daddy would haggle enthusiastically with Danny Nolan for he'd always want an extra chicken or half a pig or something more than last year as inflation was rife in Ballyhoomoloney around that time. Then whatever shade of blue was in fashion that year, Daddy would have me apply it over the primer and the plough or other implement would be put to work again.

Curious though! Daddy was a dab hand at maintaining his equipment but I never would have thought that anything Danny Nolan sold would outlast the Toba volcano, not to mention the intervening 75,000 years. Come to think about it, who was milking those cows every day? More to the point, who was eating the cheese, and making the magnificent bouquet of boiled turnips that had guided my travels hither?

Cautious now, I brought the motor vehicle to a stop at the gate to the house. Another infernal light had illuminated on the control panel and it promptly sputtered and stopped. Getting out, I patted down my dress and sniffed the fragrant air. The turnips had been salted now, and I could smell a knob of fermented butter melting atop their great steaming mass. This is what heaven must smell like, though I've still a bit of meddling to do before I find out for sure.

"Ezzie! Where in the name of Jaysus have you been?" demanded Billy Murphy with great surprise on his soiled, work-weary face, "It's your job to milk the pig and your Daddy's been breaking his back with the turnip harvest and the plough has run aground in the west field, and Billy Brophy won't come and pull it out with his tractor 'cos he says *you* owe him a refund for the Tarot reading you gave him as you said his daughter Molly was frolicking about with Jimmy Quinn from down the blacksmiths shop and when he followed her sneaking out that Thursday she went over the back fence, through Foley's yard, around Slattery's Dangle and down to the community centre to the monthly LGBTQ+ meeting where Jimmy Quinn wasn't anywhere to be found and likely wouldn't have been a great concern if he had been!"

"NO REFUNDS!" I shouted instinctively, leaving poor Billy a little taken aback and prompting him to add, "And I missed you Ezzie."

Ah poor Billy! He was a sweet auld soul. “C’mere Billy and stop with all that fussing, come on over here, I’ve got something for ya,” says I, as I loosen my dress to give him liberal access to my jangley-wangalies and there was not a word out of him for a good ten minutes, then he says, “Ezzie, you know there’s a powerful confusion spell over the land? We thought you might be caught on the outside of it,” he snivelled pitiaibly as I buttoned up my dress, motioning him to shut up as he was about to protest that he wasn’t finished, “I’ll do what I can about Billy Brophy,” says I, pondering which curse would be best suited, “but right now I need to find my old spell book to navigate the confusion spell.”

“Oh Ezzie, you’re going to save us?” Billy crooned optimistically as I trotted happily around the back of the house to find that sumptuous bowl of turnips before Billy Murphy could do up his pants again and beat me to it.

SEVEN

Up in my old room I head straight for my knicker drawer, and, right enough, under a big pile of pink frillies I find my old spell book. On the cover, a younger me, at the tender age of thirty-thousand years old, had penned 'The Eminent Mme Zxeronnna's Collected Spells and Enchantments'. Let's see now... 'Attracting Love', that was Billy Murphy's one... 'Enchanted Turnips', that was a laxative as I recall, ah! Here we are now... 'Confusion Spell'... Oh no! The page was torn out! Only the title page remained, and a little drawing of Willow the pig we'd roasted for Christmas that year! Ah feck! Who would have done that?

From behind me, I heard a quick rapping noise like 'tap tap... tap tappety tap!' Daddy!

"Daddy!" says I, "Daddy, is that you?"

'Tap tap... tap tappety tap!'

"Get out of there you silly eejit!" says I, traversing the room and turning the key in the wardrobe, causing the door to fling itself open under Daddy's weight and out he rolled like a side of boiled ham!

"Daddy?" I enquire suspiciously, "Have you been in my knicker drawer?"

He stared up at me rather defensively before muttering, "No, Ezzie, of course not, I only wear your mother's knickers! You were very young when she died Ezzie, but the doctor said she'd gotten a curse on her pancreas and the only thing that would cure it was a trip to the enchanted spring around back of the courthouse in Ballykettle Cross... it was around

the time that you started getting interested in your spells and enchantments actually Ezzie, but..."

"Yes, yes, alright Daddy, I remember!" I hastily added, not quite liking where any of this was going.

"Oh, Ezzie, is that you?" Daddy burbles in delight.

"Yes Daddy, of course it's me, haven't we been having a conversation?"

"Oh, Ezzie, you've been gone so long!" Daddy crooned, hitching up his belt to cover the frilly red knickers he was wearing.

"Daddy, you know that wardrobe is cursed, why would you get into it?" I enquired patiently.

"Well, I was in the outhouse Ezzie," I probed him with my eyes, "doing my business," I gave it a little more time, "and just as I was about to make my way back across the yard didn't I realise that I was actually in your wardrobe, and the door was locked! I recognised it because when you were little your mammy used to lock me in here when I was bold."

Daddy stared up at me pitifully as though to enquire whether the issue had been adequately explained, then deciding it wasn't, he continued, "Ezzie, there's a powerful confusion spell has been cast over the land! The Muck Stream is flowing uphill and Finnegan's Finagle that used to lead down to the post office by Connelly's Corner goes 'round Kelly's Bog and comes out at the back cabbage field... and there's cabbages there... monstrous big yokes with purple leaves and it's not even cabbage season, and Tommy Noonan went out the back door of Breeda Donnelly's bar and found himself in the stall in the ladies' toilet in the nightclub down by the drooping bridge in the middle of a hen party and had to explain that to Sergeant Quigley and..."

"Ah, Breeda Donnelly was always throwing Tommy Noonan out of the women's bog Daddy, he's an auld leech and you know that!" I counter persuasively.

"No, no, Ezzie, you have to believe me, it's true! There's a powerful confusion spell over the land, and... well... we as once thought that *you* might have done it... erm... accidentally... in your practicing, you know?"

So we got word to Estralaada and she found your spell book,” Daddy gestured to the book in my hand, “and she had a go at it and that just made it worse, so she tore out the spell, Ezzie, put it in her crystal shrine and directed healing energy at it!”

About now I had to perch myself on the end of the bed because I could feel a guffaw coming on that’d knock me off my feet, “Estralaada? Crystal Healing? Ah, Daddy, you’re all a shower of eejits, sure if *I’d* been the one to cast a confusion spell over the land, don’t you think it would have worked properly, and not affected the cabbages?”

“Well, that had occurred to us Ezzie... that the spell might have been botched. So we tried to get word to the powerful healer in Ballycumlonely... just in case, you know, she might be able to realign the magical energies and undo the spell!”

“Hmm, which *healer* might that be then?”

“The venerable Mme. Trianalaa Zerces, Ezzie.”

“DADDY! DON’T SPEAK THE NAME OF THAT FETID WENCH!”

“Oh, now Ezzie,” Daddy pleaded, “I know you two had a falling out, but she is known to be a very powerful healer and we needed all the help we could get!”

“Oh, Daddy, no, not that old hack! You know her fetid medicine has killed a dozen people, a number of donkeys and a billygoat over the years, she’s a monster Daddy, you shouldn’t be having anything to do with her at all!”

“Well, it doesn’t much matter Ezzie, because nobody can get in touch with her anyhow as the lines to Ballycumlonely are down, and when we sent one of Willy Tiernan’s lads down through the forest track to see what’s that about, he woke up ’round back of the cowshed in intimate embrace with little Billy Downey, and they’d both lost their memories!”

“Ah, for feck sake Daddy, have ye none of ye any cop on at all?”

Daddy thought for a minute then held up his hand staring in confusion at the object he brandished therein and enquired, “What’s this Ezzie? My bog roll has transmuted into a... what is it Ezzie?”

“That’s a ball gag Daddy, put it back where you found it, I need a cup of tea.”

“I’ll get the Gold Blend,” Daddy chirped happily.

“You’ll get the *what?*”

“A nice cup of Barry’s Gold Blend for you Ezzie, I could do with a cup myself!”

“What has happened to you Daddy? Don’t we drink Lyon’s Green Label with a splash of goats’ milk? What kind of haughty nonsense have you been up to that you’ve switched to Barry’s Gold Blend?”

“Well, after you left we got cut off from Dublin with...” I interrupted, “The confusion spell, yes, yes I understand.”

“So we used what we had at hand Ezzie, and we survived in the hopes that one day Triana...” I shot Daddy a glance that would neuter a feral cat, “erm... I mean... that one day *you* would return, Ezzie. Return and save us all!”

“So, where’s the confusion spell now Daddy, the one from my book?” I ask as my teacup fills with putrid steaming red liquid that I just know is going to get knocked on the floor in a minute, ’cos I’m surely not drinking the swill.

“Last I heard it was in Estralaada’s crystal healing shrine. She’s trying to appease the spell by directing loving crystal energy at it!” Daddy elucidated with just a hint of pride in his voice.

“Oh, Mother of Divine Mercy, what kind of dopes am I dealing with here?” I mutter quietly to myself as Daddy splashes goats’ milk into the vile concoction beside me turning it from hideous red to repellent pink.

“Alright Daddy!” I acquiesce, “If you’d be so kind as to give me directions to Estralaada’s shrine of healing crystals, I’ll retrieve the spell and try the reversal!”

“That’s the spirit Ezzie! Estralaada will help you, I’m sure.” Daddy paused, then fell suddenly silent, remaining so for many minutes. I accidentally knocked my tea to the floor and was just done retrieving the

flowery white china teacup, mercifully undamaged, as it had landed on the dog's blanket, eliciting a flurry of growls and a sleepy bark. Daddy seemed, in the excitement, to be spurred to further conversation.

"Ezzie?"

"Yes Daddy?"

"Ezzie, I was wondering something."

The sun flickered through the trees on the other side of the Muck Field as Daddy composed his question.

"Ezzie? Why did you wait so long to come back to help us?"

"Confusion spell," I offered, feeling my feet ache and my back getting tired.

"No, I know that Ezzie, but, if you *cast* the confusion spell, I mean, if you put the confusion spell over the land to protect us from the disaster... or if you know who did... or if you have knowledge of such spells, well, why didn't you come back sooner?"

Now by rights that's a very good question, and being tired as I was at this time, having the sort of day I had as you wouldn't wish on a rabid badger, I was more interested in a good long nap 'till sun-up. But still Daddy's question rankled on my nerves. I let out a dainty belch that again woke the dog, who bolted from his blanket and rattled the crockery on the dresser and I smelled the receding bouquet of ripe purple turnips as the house aired out after dinner, and the glorious, sharp, bright Ballyhoomoloney sun winked its way down to rest as it passed every branch on the big oak tree over Muck Field, and I heard Billy Murphy bathing himself in the water butt out back, just as he did the day I bolted and left him for dead, and I had to do a little soul searching, or at least some creative explaining in the matter.

I knew full well that the reason the fetid Mme. Trianalaa Zerces couldn't be contacted, notwithstanding technological difficulties caused by the confusion spell upon the communications lines to Ballycumlonely, was also necessitated by the reality of her predicament, being, as she was, wallowing at the bottom of a deep well, subsisting on a vitalising diet of

sphagnum moss and slugs, her only recourse to magic being such as she could remember from her many scribbled conjurations and rantings for which she was infamous. Infamous not so much for their danger or efficacy, but for her incessant pesterment of every publishing house up in Dublin to get them in print, most of them eventually giving her a fake address to get rid of her.

The Toba volcano had wreaked havoc on the world, yes, and the Five Counties were largely unscathed thanks to the powerful spell that I had cast over them, a confusion spell originally intended to make it impossible for anyone ever to find the mouth of the well which auspiciously served to imprison the fusty old crone. But in an exquisite dance of karma something terrible had happened, and something wonderful. Somehow she had managed to project the effluvium of her astral essence out of said well by riding in the clicks and pauses of the 4G signal that the millennials had invented such that they can communicate their important musings to identical millennials in short memos, 280 glyphs in length, unmindful of the danger she posed to their civilisation, if one could call it that, thus negating the benefit that had accrued from her incarceration afoot the unfortunate accident with the billygoat which she appears to have abused to a state of despair that it could only side with me and upend her into her watery confinement. On balance, let's consider this a *terrible* outcome in the final run of things.

But the confusion spell, well now, that was a stroke of luck! You see, I won't be telling Daddy this, nor Billy, nor my sisters Doralada and Philladora, and most especially not my younger sister Estralaada, the venerable crystal healer of Ballykettle Cross, but you see I don't *remember* casting the confusion spell. Or should I say the *protection* spell, oh yes! That sounds mighty! I don't remember that, and do you know why dear reader? Well, seeing as I was fleeing for my life from the village during the eruption, I had little choice in the matter but to sup upon the medicine of the 'eminent' Trianalaa Zerces in mid-egress. Nauseating, stomach-churning, vomitous green effluent as it was, I couldn't see properly for hours after and the memory of my time following her unfortunate dispatch down the well shaft is something of a blur, and I do believe, if I had cast the spell... the *protection spell*, well I must have,

mustn't I, being the philanthropist I am, I did it from memory, and it worked!

“Daddy, how could Estralaada afford a house in Ballykettle Cross?” Ballykettle Cross was broadly considered the Riviera of Ballyhoomoloney and it was a puzzle to me how Estralaada, not the brightest of my sisters, could have managed that feat.

Daddy snored loudly in his chair by the fire and through the veil of sleep he offered only, “Crystal healing, Ezzie,” then redoubled his cacophony of snoring.

EIGHT

“Wake up Ezzie!”

“Hmm, Whaaaaat? Billy, feck off, I’m sleeping in, go look after yourself.”

“Ezzie, we need you downstairs.”

“Well, *I* don’t need *you* downstairs Billy Murphy, I’ve come back from Dublin and I have a new life there, and my tastes have somewhat exceeded what you can offer me now Billy Murphy, I have a millennial consort who sees to all my needs and provides the bitcoins, pays for everything he does, bought me AirPods yesterday and all, you can’t compete now Billy Murphy!”

“I don’t know what that is Ezzie, but it sounds nice, and I’m happy for you, your new life sounds like a right wonderful affair.” I could hear Billy’s voice break a little and as my slumber slithered down the sheets, exposing me to the world again, I had the clarity of mind to realise I’d hurt his feelings. This isn’t usually a problem for me, but there’s something wrong in my brain, you see, it hurts kindof in the back when I offend Billy’s feelings. The Net Curtains says there’s something in there called a *conscience*, and the millennials have a machine called an MRI that can find it and then they cut it out, but I haven’t gotten around to researching it further.

“Ezzie, I’m not looking to canoodle with you, I know you’re sophisticated now, and you live up in Dublin an’ all, but, you see, your motor vehicle, the fancy blue one you rode in on, it’s attracted quite a fuss. Danny Dunphy’s donkey, Delaney, he’s after kicking it and it started making a terrible wailing noise, so Fr. Brophy was called and Bláithín Ó

Súilleabháin drove him down in the milk cart to have a look. He said there's an angry daemon in it and the donkey set it off and so they did a blessing over it and it stopped but now it's making a different noise and Bláithín says..."

"Alright, alright Billy! Would you stop, I'm awake, and you're giving me a headache!"

I rolled over in the bed to put my feet on the floor and have a little stretch.

"And you brought me a cup of tea, did you?"

"No," Billy informed me coldly.

"Well, what kind of noise is it making now, is it a kind of 'bleep-bleep-bloop', or is it a 'daaah-daaah'?" I expand upon my description using the kinds of exuberant gestures that Billy likes and understands.

"Em, I don't know Ezzie, it sounds sortof like a 'ding! ding!', but there's nobody inside and we're afraid to go too close!"

Billy was kneeling now, his subservient position communicating a grand respect for my newfound means in the world and a certain terror that the millennial motor vehicle might devour him should he trifle with it, culminating in a piteous pleading for me to placate it and liberate him from his petrifying predicament.

Outside the front door of the house, Fr. Brophy was praying fervently and Bláithín was in her customary position kneeling beside him. The offending donkey was long gone, fearing retribution, and Daddy was watching from behind a tree some twenty feet away. Some of the boys from the village had wandered up to view the scene, lead placidly by Charlie Doyle. Cormac Quinn, the most educated man of the village, was rumoured to be inbound also. I shooed them all away.

"What's it doing Ezzie?" enquired Doralada, my dumpy sister, with a tone conveying no understanding of the danger that she wasn't actually in, but that had Daddy seeking refuge now around the corner of the house.

"It's alright Doralada," I reassured, as I motioned for her, Daddy and Philladora to come closer, "it's just a millennial motor vehicle! The daemon is safely locked up in the front there and it only moves when you

stab it in the arse with this shiny spike!” I brandished the key to reassure them further that I was in complete control. It was then that I heard the noise that had been worrying them! Of course, as I fled Dublin to locate the well and deal with the distasteful problem posed by Zerces, I had been sure to take one of the millennial’s magic moving picture boxes, the one he calls an i-paddle, so that I might remain in contact, knowing now, as I do, that my protection spell is easily penetrated by the 4G, which is, in essence, the problem that has brought me here.

‘Ding-ding!’ went the magic moving picture box as I extricated it from the millennial motor vehicle, eliciting a gasp of appreciation from all gathered, though causing Fr. Brophy and Bláithín Ó Súilleabháin to cry, “WITCH!” in unison before beating a hasty retreat which, I suspect, was only an opportune excuse to resume their philandering from which they’d been inconveniently diverted.

Not wanting to over-stimulate Daddy or my sisters, I thought it best to go back into the house and get them started on preparing my breakfast which I would need for the busy day ahead. Pigs’ liver with onion gravy, savoury stone cakes with pickled turnip relish, gruel with raisins and a bowl of Special K, oh mercy, never had I enjoyed such a feast of a breakfast, I had to concede it was wonderful to be back. Firing up the millennial moving picture box, I read a delightful message from my millennial consort Jamesie.

“Ezzie, where are you? My new snoodie is chaffing me! I don’t know how to peel avocado, Ezzie, come back!”

Ah, isn’t that sweet, the millennial misses me!

Next I do my Wordle. As usual, I start with ‘Ezzie’, but that only yields me an ‘E’ today, but at least I know it’s only *one* ‘E’, Hmm how about eejit, oh no, wait that’s two! Oh, well Wordle doesn’t know that word, grand! Eventually on my sixth go I work my way down to ‘cleat’, success! All the time Billy Murphy is sitting behind me munching on a big chunk of pigs’ liver, the gravy dribbling down his fork and onto his hand.

“That’s a very fancy game you’re playing there Ezzie, can I have a go?”

“I don’t think you’d like it Billy, you have to know about words... lots of them.” I smile sympathetically, but really I just don’t have three months to teach Billy Murphy to play Wordle.

“Well, I know what a cleat is!” he adds with just a hint of pride, “It’s like the folds in your billowy flower dress, the one you used to wear when we went on rides in the country on a Sunday morning, when I’d put you up on the seat on the back and we’d spin ’round by the ferret sanctuary and down the Muck Hill. Remember Ezzie? We’d stop by Dangling Rock and sip lemonade and you’d give me a go on your jangley-wangalies and that one time the wind took your skirt up over your head... because all the cleats made it loose, and then we...”

“Ah, yes Billy, yes I remember, I do. But stop now, that was a long time ago, we won’t be doing no more cavorting down at Dangling Rock, those are just... erm... wonderful memories!”

I didn’t have the heart to tell poor Billy that a *cleat* was actually more like what he’d feel on his backside if he ever tried that trick again!

“I found the bike you know! You left it stuck in a big pile of muck down on Quigley’s Corner. It was all bent up, but I put it back together and fixed it all up nice, because it reminded me of you, Ezzie.”

Having been through as many corporeal apparatuses as I have, it’s been my misfortune to now select one with this regrettable brain defect that makes me feel sad when Billy Murphy is saying the most stupid things about bicycles I stole on him and missing me, and how I left him to go and recreate the human race in my image. I’m a profound healer you see, I’ve informed the new emanation, and once the millennials have all died out I have great hope for the rest of it.

“But, Billy luv, you know I had to leave. I had to cast the protection spell that allowed the Five Counties to live through the eruption of the Toba volcano! I’m a very important woman you know!”

A sour look passed over his face. Billy put down his fork and rose.

“I used to be important to you Ezzie,” and he was gone.

‘Ding-ding!’ went the magic moving picture box, oh what now? Twitter! Feckin’ millennial nonsense... still though... could be important, so I give it a poke, smearing onion gravy across the screen. At first it looks broken, the screen goes all dark! I hear running water. Hmm... What cryptic millennial meme is this? Then I hear the screeching, grating voice and my stomach turns over. The liver and the onion gravy threaten to make a reappearance as the shrill wail pierces the air. Oh no! Oh no, it can’t be!

“Hello? Hello? Am I on the TikTok? Is that TikTok? I want to talk to you about the charlatan in your midst. I have a grave warning for ye!”

There followed over a minute of cackling as the creature oozed around its cavernous environs, and a ray of sun seemed to penetrate from above, obliquely illuminating the revolting visage of the ‘eminent’ Mme. Trianalaa Zerces, who resumed her diatribe.

“I’m talking to you from the 4G! I can’t come in person because I was pushed down a well! This is where I’ve lived for the last seventy thousand years because of a vile and disgusting creature you know as Mme. Esmerelda Zxeronna! Adept of the Tarot! The Greatest Healer who Ever Lived! Lies! All lies!

“Then she cast a powerful confusion spell so I couldn’t even call for help! And my beloved billygoat, Humphrey...”

Here she paused for dramatic effect and wiped a tear from her haggard, putrid eye.

“She cooked and ate him!”

‘Ding-ding!’ Now millennial Jamesie is asking me, first if I’m seeing what’s happening on the TikTok, and further to confirm if I am indeed a fetid hoodwinker and quack as is currently being alleged. I assure him that I’m not.

Oh, no, I’ve lost the broadcast, em, wait, three finger swipe, is it, no, pull down from the top... no... pull up from the bottom... got it!

“You can’t even help me because the confusion spell is impenetrable! So I ask you to do just one thing...”

I don't like the sound of this.

“To make sure she can't do this to anybody else EVER AGAIN!”

Wait, how many followers does she have?

“CANCEL HER! Cancel Mme. Esmerelda Zxeronna Johnson Lee Lewis III, aka Ezzie, the (so-called) Greatest Healer!

“Cancel her with extreme prejudice! In perpetuity! Throughout the Universe!”

I thought that last bit was a tad vitriolic, I mean even if I *had* pushed her, which she can't prove, ‘In perpetuity, throughout the Universe’, you need a hobby luv.

ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY THOUSAND FOLLOWERS! Oh no! Oh, no! What has she done!

Memories flood back from the time I accidentally let the spice drawer become depleted of za'atar and, finding none on his avocado toast, Millennial Jamesie cancelled me for the afternoon! That was bad enough, but ‘In perpetuity, throughout the Universe’, this could ruin me!

Daddy, oblivious to the crippling injury I have just suffered approaches from the right and offers, “Ezzie, I have a surprise for you!”

“Not now Daddy! I'm being cancelled on the Net Curtains, all the millennials will see!” Tears welling up in my eyes now, I look pleadingly to my Daddy to see if he can say anything that might help put this right, as only a loving daughter can hope.

“I found it down back of the sofa Ezzie, it's best before fifty thousand years ago...”

“Oh, Daddy, what am I going to do?” I whimper.

“And I think the cat may have used it as litter, you know, before Donny Dunphy ran over him...”

“Oh Daddy, I don't want to be cancelled, the millennials take that very seriously, and I have a book to sell, and my Tarot readings are bringing in a tidy few bitcoins I don't even tell millennial Jamesie about, and that'll all be over, and... Oh no!”

“I’ll just boil them up in the pot for an hour or so, that’ll bring them back to life,” Daddy continues unhelpfully.

“Jamesie is a millennial! If the millennials cancel me, then I’ll loose Jamesie too!” I wail as I make this horrifying realisation that can’t be denied.

“Splash of goats’ milk, that’ll cheer you up Ezzie,” the noise continues.

“Daddy, you haven’t been listening to me! The millennials are going to cancel me! And you’re going on about things you found behind the sofa that the cat used as a litter box, what are you on about?”

He brandished the cube-shaped box, two shades of green, with a red stripe across the middle. “They’re from before the eruption of the Toba volcano Ezzie... when we were a family! They’ve been behind the sofa ever since!” He cautiously brought the box of Lyons Green Label tea to his nose and quickly pulled it away in disgust as he smelled the evidence of what the cat had done to it before its seventy-five thousand year maturation had commenced.

“Oh, what the hell!” I sighed, slumping in my chair in defeat, “Brew it up Daddy. It can’t be any worse than Barry’s Gold Blend!”

NINE

The night was cold and the walls were closing in. The wind outside appeared to be chanting, 'Cancelled! Cancelled! Cancelled!' and Billy Murphy didn't visit me in my bed, though I would have welcomed the comfort of his arms.

This has possibly been the worst day of my life. Worse than the time I got my dress caught in the revolving door at the airport!

I missed my millennial consort for whom I would be mixing up the medicine about now, were I home in Dublin. Would I ever be able to go back there? Would the millennials allow it, now that I'd been cancelled?

Would the Google even answer my questions now, to tell me how many fluid ounces are in a litre, or what time it is when I can't be bothered getting up.

That's when the fever set in. There was a full moon that night and it shone brightly in my window. I held up my hand to see the cold moonlight play through the crevices of my fingers and I saw they were translucent. It was then I knew for sure that the millennials had cancelled me good. There was no hope now, I was fading away. My cancellation was seeping in on the 4G.

I closed my eyes to stem the tears and felt myself sliding through the horsehair mattress and when I opened them again I was lying on the floor under my bed staring at the bedsprings and it was then that I heard the door open and footsteps enter.

“Ezzie? Are you in here? I heard what happened Ezzie, I’m so sorry.” Billy’s dimwitted voice was irritating but a deep relief swelled in my chest knowing he was near. Seeing nobody in the room, he turned and the door closed behind him leaving me with my pain again, slightly abated.

TEN

“Do you want to call out on the trunk or would you prefer to avail of the extension loop?”

“Whaaaat?”

“Would you like to place your call on the *trunk* ma’am?”

“Ma’am? ma’am! I’m *Madamme* Esmerelda Zxeronnna! And I don’t give a whore’s knickers about your trunk Patty O’Byrne, and I never did, and I know you... oh I know you! You were always lezzing about you were, and I told you the night I woke after Breeda Donnelly’s party with your hand up my skirt... I told you Patty O’Byrne, I’m a decent woman, an’ I just want to place an international call to Dublin, and that’s that! Trunk? Extension! What did they teach you in that college in Dublin luv? Plugging wires in and out, that all you do! Just shut up with your nonsense and get me Mr. Quinlan on Dorset Street. He has a red phone with a big handle on the side!”

“Yes of course ma’am... I mean *Madamme* Zxeronnna! Quinlan... Quinlan... Oh! Yes! Mr. Quinlan *Esquire*, Dorset Street!”

“Yeeees luv... Mr. Quinlan *Esquire*... Dorset Street!”

“Specialises in cases of indecency?”

“Yes luv... wait! What are you implying?”

“Oh, nothing at all *Madamme* Zxeronnna... please hold for the ring!”

“Here, you! You don’t get to...”

“Mr. Quinlan’s Office, Sarah speaking! How may I help you today?”

“Hello... is that Dublin? You sound very far away!”

“Well, I expect we *are* far away ma’am! What is your call regarding?”

“I want to talk to Mr. Quinlan Esquire. I’m Mme. Esmerelda Zxeronnna.”

“Hmmm, let me see... Oh, yes Ms. Zxeronnna, Mr. Quinlan has been trying to contact you about your outstanding account!”

“As I said I’m *Madamme* Esmerelda Zxeronnna, and I need to meet with Mr. Quinlan *post haste* as my reputation has been tarnished something terrible here in Ballyhoomoloney, and I require to be made right in the matter!”

“But of course Mme. Zxeronnna! Mr. Quinlan will meet with you on Tuesday at noon, should you be available.”

“Tuesday... Tuesday... hemmmh! Well, I normally do Tessa O’Donovan’s DNA Activation on a Tuesday afternoon, and she’s dreadful prissy if I’m late at all... no she’d be up in arms would Tessa O’Donovan as her husband goes to the market in Ballykettle Cross on a Tuesday and she does like to do her DNA Activation before he gets home ’cos he brings a sheep’s head to boil up for the tea and she...”

“Alright! Ms. Zxeronnna, I mean *Madamme* Zxeronnna,” the impatient voice broke in, “if you’d just hold for Mr. Quinlan, he has become available.”

Well now, that’s much better! That’s the way a person of my stature deserves to be treated, we’ll have this sorted out in no time! Just then the receiver fell right through my translucent hand and I had to resort to lying on the ground, placing my head beside it. It was then that Daddy, on his way to the outhouse for his morning relief, walked right through me in one sickening sweep from heels to head and I was glad I hadn’t been able to eat anything that morning for I’d be face first in my victuals now if I had.

“Mme. Zxeronnna! What a pleasure to speak to you again!” I got a flutter in my knickers as the soft treacly voice of Mr. Quinlan Esquire graced the line and I heard Patty O’Byrne stifle a cough thinking she was so clever that she could plug her headphones into my loop and hear all my business.

“You feck off Patty O’Byrne, this is none of your concern, you leave me alone y’auld tart!” I bellowed down the line and heard the click of her plug disconnecting, though, in the process, somewhat startling Mr. Quinlan Esquire.

“Erm, yes, erm, Mme. Zxeronnna, or Ezzie if I may?”

“Oh, you *may* luv, call me Ezzie, do!”

“Ezzie, yes! Erm, I was just down with Suzzie in accounts and we were going through our receivables.”

“Ooooh, that sounds like a fancy Dublin thing,” I offered by means of flattery, “I’m sure that could be none of my concern, Mr. Quinlan!”

“Well, yes, it may be of *some* concern as your bank has not settled your account, Ezzie.”

“Oh!” I falter, feigning interest, “That sounds most perplexing, perhaps we could discuss that at another time, I have a matter of grave concern!”

“Well, yes, Ezzie, we can revisit the matter of your bill on Tuesday if you wish to attend my office. Your total is twelve thousand, three hundred and seventy two euros. You could perhaps bring a cheque?”

“Erm... Yeeees!” I assure him, “Or perhaps you’d prefer a big bag of bitcoins, or I have the doggy coins as well. That’s what I get doing my Tarot readings, you understand!”

“No Ezzie, I’m sorry, we must insist on fiat.”

“Right so... I’ll buy you a Punto! Now we must discuss the matter of... well, actually it’s a little embarrassing.”

“More embarrassing than the Shelbourne incident?” Inquired Mr. Quinlan with an affected professional interest.

“Well, now that wasn’t really my fault Mr. Quinlan. I *always* bring my bag, and on this occasion it just happened to be on the ground when the silverware fell from the table, and... we’ve been through this Mr. Quinlan luv, you said you understood entirely and that I was blameless in the matter.”

“In the matter of the silverware, yes, perhaps even all six settings, but in the matter of the candelabra...”

“Well, it’s worse than all that this time Mr. Quinlan, much, much worse!”

“Oh, my, well you had better tell me about it all on Tuesday. I really must dash now.”

“No! Wait! I’ve been cancelled by the millennials!”

There was a gasp followed by a rasping noise as Mr. Quinlan shuffled his receiver under his beard.

“Cancelled by the millennials? Oh, goodness no! Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that Ezzie, and I’m afraid to say... cases like that are very difficult to win!”

“But you *have to* win Mr. Quinlan, I’m starting to fade!”

“Oh dear! That’s stage two! Oh Ezzie, you mustn’t come up to Dublin, please dear, just post the cheque, but wherever you are, you must stay there, you can’t survive in Dublin if you’ve been cancelled! You must immediately go on the YouTube and the TikTok, Twitter, Instagram and Facebook and apologise to the millennials! Don’t say anything inflammatory, just make a vague but apparently sincere apology, it doesn’t really matter what for. That should buy you some time and if you’re still with us next week you could perhaps risk visiting my office.”

“Apologise? What am I paying you for? I’m not apologising to a bunch of dirty millennials!”

“Oh, no, Ezzie, don’t say that, you can’t win this case. I’m sorry dear, there’s only one way out!”

The silence hung in the air for some moments before Mr. Quinlan decided he had other clients to attend to and advised me of my updated charges... a man after my own heart. It’s adorable that he thinks I’m actually going to pay that bill!

* * *

The Muck Road was parched today, the surface a tapestry of deep crevices and irregular brown islands, nature’s stepping stones, which one could

stride or hop between, occasionally requiring ones skirt and bloomers to be hitched up about the waist. It cracked and crunched imperceptibly underfoot as the reduced weight of my ephemeral form traversed it nimbly. The walk took about half an hour. I passed Quigley's Corner where I had met the Lady of the Hill, taking my first borrowed corporeal apparatus and beginning a new life with my great love, the Chieftain of the Hill. I passed by Brady's gate where I'd given Willy Brophy a go on my jangley-wangalies the night I had a fight with Billy Murphy and wanted to make him jealous. In the distance I saw Dangling Rock where Billy and I used to drink lemonade on a Sunday morning watching the sparrows fight over worms in the soil after a spring shower, then I turned up Finnegan's Finagle and into the shortcut through the boglands to Ballykettle Cross, where, on the west road, a hundred yards out, stood the majestic stone cottage covered in ivy and clematis in the middle of a lush garden of crocuses, huge erect lilies, tulips, and pale white and pink rose bushes growing over the ruins of an old disused outhouse. Indoor Plumbing! She has indoor plumbing! Very fancy!

"Estralaada my dearest sister! How I have missed you!" I bellowed with open arms as she cautiously drew back the heavy ornate door, a beatific smile spreading across her perplexed face as she scanned the air to discern the boundaries of my indistinct form. Her hair had been washed and oiled this month and three purple petunias were woven into it. Around her neck was an assortment of crystals of all shapes and sizes threaded onto a variety of chains and coloured twine, totalling about twenty, each, she informed me, having a different energetic bias, as we made our way to the parlour which was lushly decorated with red velvet drapes and hard, round cushions in affectedly untidy piles that was know to be the fashion amongst the well-to-do dwellers of Ballykettle Cross, well, the part south of the library anyhow, well, I say library but they don't actually keep books there seeing as no person in town has any mind to read, but the café and the books on tape are quite popular, albeit the erotic ones are more in demand.

Mercifully, Estralaada was well stocked with Lyons Green Label and I had the finest cup of tea since my arrival in Ballyhoomoloney, though I was unable to hold the cup for very long as it persisted in falling through

my etherial fingers to the point that Estralaada took it from me for, she said, it had been a gift from a dear friend who had once lived and practiced crystal healing in Donegal but regrettably died in an accident caused by her mistaking a chunk of sodalite for lapis lazuli.

“Daddy tells me you took a spell from my book and put it in your crystal shrine so as to direct healing energy at it?” I inquired with a straight face.

“Oh, no Ezzie! The kind of spells you dabble in would only pollute the positive energy of my crystal shrine!”

“But there’s a page missing from my spell book, and Daddy says *you* thieved it!” I persisted.

“Oh, no, Ezzie, I didn’t take one of your dubious spells! As I explained, I would have no want of it, nor could I do anything with it! Rather, I saw that Daddy was in a fluster and I *told* him that I would do my best, but I assure you, neither your spell book nor any page within it has ever graced the interior of my sacred abode and, if it had done, I would know instantly as my energies would be egregiously perturbed and I would be days realigning them.

“You see, all my crystals are perfectly tuned, Ezzie! Each resonates with the etheric bias of its material form! They can’t be in the presence of your particular variety of magic. You should take an interest in crystal healing Ezzie, you would find it very effective in your practice!”

“No thanks luv, I have the Tarot, and that’s all I need!”

“Oh, suit yourself, but if I may be so impertinent as to ask... is your Tarot going to rectify your current predicament?” Estralaada enquired with warm condescent.

“Well, yes, I mean, it *may*, I pulled the Eight of Wands last night!”

“Ezzie is that you?” She reached out her hand and passed it through a cloud of incense billowing up from her little brass burner.

“Estralaada, I’m over here! And you know that! Stop it!”

She tittered, feeling her point well made, and added, “I know Ezzie, but I can supplement your etherial energy by channelling your base chakra

directly into your solar plexus and augmenting the frequency of your core vibration with orange calcite which will unblock your soul energy, liberating it into your aura where it can solidify your corporeal form.”

“And that’ll un-cancel me?” I enquired with urgency.

“No, Ezzie, but it will give you a fighting chance to find the bitch that did this to you and finish her off for good!”

“Now we’re talking Estralaada, you were always my favourite sister!”

ELEVEN

‘Whirr... clunk!’ the motor vehicle sputtered and died. I have heard mention that the daemon which powers the modern motor vehicle is a rather fickle beast requiring a peculiar pungent distillate of petroleum upon which to subsist and, without sufficient supply of this, would not propel the infernal contraption forward. It is more difficult to diagnose than a sick donkey and in all the times that the millennial and I ventured out in the motor vehicle I was sure to make myself scarce when the fuel was inserted as it costs an onerous price. This strategy though, unfortunately, leaves me now unprepared to feed the daemon the required sustenance to transport me on my journey of exploration that might yield the discovery of the Big Red Barn where I may find the feted, detestable and putrid form of my nemesis, the one who has brought this pox upon me.

“Hmmm, let me see... red medicine... yellow medicine. Ah! There we go! Green medicine!” I figured the green medicine ought to do the trick, though I was surprised that my old medicine stash had never been discovered seeing as how it was only casually hidden behind a hay bail in the rickety old barn out back. I would have thought that Billy Murphy would have been worrying at it and probably Daddy too, as he was always fond of my red medicine once we worked out the temporary blindness issues with the recipe.

‘Glug, glug, glug!’ The third bottle of green medicine disappeared into the motor vehicle’s hungry fuel spout, and I returned to the cabin to insert the key that would wake the daemon to feast upon the new supply of nourishing distillate. There was a crunching noise, and a loud bang, and

the motor sprung to life. Delighted, I jumped into the pilot's seat and began the launch sequence, but unfortunately, before I got very far, the motor coughed and sputtered out and no amount of twisting the key would cajole the monster to revive. I was not defeated though, I merely must try different colours of medicine until the infernal contraption is placated into operation.

It was then that Daddy pottered out from the old barn. He had been consulting with Benny, his favourite clairvoyant pig.

"Ezzie, is that you?" He queried the air around the motor vehicle, not realising that I was in a somewhat diminished form resulting from my undeserved cancellation.

"Yes, Daddy! I'm in here!" I bellowed at him, but as Daddy lacked the psychic gifts himself, he was unable to hear or see me, and so was unnaturally confused as to the source of the cantankerous noises emitted from the direction of the glistening blue motor vehicle of which he was already afraid after his experiences the prior day.

"Ezzie? Ezzie? You need to go into the light!"

"No Daddy, now stop that!" I bellowed, loud enough to penetrate the astral barrier, "I'm not dead... nor am I dying, I've just been cancelled!"

I could see I was getting through to him so I took him by the hand to lead him inside, thought he was disoriented as he always was after his sessions with Benny who, while a fine clairvoyant (for a pig), lacked the subtlety of exposition required to channel advice from the energetic realms with the flair necessary to make it digestible to the recipient.

"I've been meaning to tell you Ezzie," Daddy swooned as he spoke, "about the daisies."

"Yes Daddy, I know all about daisies, don't be worried about that now, come on inside and we'll sit you down, you'll be fine in an hour or two," I assured him.

Upon entering the house, Daddy was reluctant to sit in his favourite chair, instead leading me to his smoking parlour and, as my corporeal mass was somewhat diminished in my condition, I couldn't resist being dragged

along with him into his favourite room in the house, his haven of refuge. A pipe sat in the ashtray beside his smoking chair and I realised now that this was his destination.

“Daddy, I don’t have time for this! I have to go find the wretched witch who’s after having me cancelled!”

“Who’s that now?” Daddy enquired dreamily, his voice lilting in vacant inquiry.

“The fetid Zerces woman, Daddy! You know... the one who’s been causing me trouble all these years!”

“Oh! Mme. Trianalaa Zerces? Oh, yes, your old friend! She was such a nice young lady.”

“No Daddy! Don’t ever say that! That woman is a pestilence upon us! She lies, and she cheats and she’s a mimic who, entranced by my success as a healer, decided to steal my ideas as her own. She’s a carbuncle on the tender buttocks of all that is good in this world Daddy, and I don’t want to hear her name fall from your lips again as long as I live!”

I took a deep breath as, having only half my form, the towering rage had made me lightheaded.

“You used to have sleepovers when you were girls!”

“Daddy I don’t want to...”

“And the daisies!”

“What? Daddy, would you just smoke your pipe while I go sort out a little errand?”

Looking now at my Daddy, I could see the years had taken a toll on him. His hair, though full and flowing for a man his age, was greying at the edges and his eyes were deeply lined as though with concern. Still he was a god of a man, strong, powerful, imperturbable, his pipe raised from his lips to point at the far wall. I followed his gaze and discovered a hideous bright green splotch that, at first, I thought could only be mould but then I realised it had been framed in a most delicate oak with gold paint around the edges.

“The daisies!” Daddy droned, “Ezzie, I wanted to tell you about the daisies... Tessa O’Donovan’s daisies!”

I realised then that this splotch of green and yellow and white was not in fact a fungal growth but was something that Tessa O’Donovan had fashioned on one of her many dalliances into the country to ‘conduct her art’ as she would say.

“Oh, sweet Mother of Divine Mercy, Daddy please tell me you didn’t pay for that!”

“No, Ezzie, I was meaning to tell you the story of the daisies, because you said you wanted to get to Ballycumlonely. You know that’s not an easy task now that there’s a confusion spell over the land, don’t you?”

“Yes Daddy, I know about the confusion spell, actually, it seems to have served more as a protection spell, and whoever cast it deserves great recognition and reward, for in all the years that have lapped ye here in Ballyhoomoloney, ye have lived in peace and prosperity unperturbed by the Toba volcano...” Daddy stared blankly, “and the Quaternary Megafauna Extinction event...” Daddy stared blankly, “the Dark Ages... RuPaul’s Drag Race... Daddy, I protected all of ye from all of *that!*”

Daddy stared blankly in reverie at the vomitous splotch on the far wall and I realised he was beyond reach, and a story was inevitable so I inched slowly to the door hoping to take egress.

“Daddy,” I whispered comfortingly, “you go on and tell your story and I’ll be back in a few days, I have some business in Ballycumlonely, assuming I can find it.”

A tad exasperated now, Daddy gestured firmly with the end of his unlit pipe at the far wall and blurted, “That’s where Tessa went, Ezzie, that’s what I’m trying to tell you, now stop being obtuse and listen to me!”

“Tessa O’Donovan went to Ballycumlonely?”

“Yes Ezzie, she just got back last week! There’s a terrible turnip shortage there since the confusion spell made the way impassible.”

“Tessa O’Donovan? That dizzy auld bat, she couldn’t find her way out of a paper bag Daddy, don’t be silly!”

“She did, Ezzie! I’m telling you, just like she told me!” Daddy insisted now, gesticulating wildly at the abomination adorning the wall opposite him.

“Alright Daddy, alright now, that’s enough, you know how Benny the pig likes to wind you up, you take a minute there with your pipe and I’ll go make you a cup of that hot brown swill you call tea.”

Placing the cup of sickly pale red fluid beside him, I announced the arrival of his Barry’s Gold Blend only to find Daddy unexpectedly lucid, and still very attached to his purportedly factual story about Tessa O’Donovan’s daisies, and while I really did need to be getting on, I was also a touch concerned that he might, for once, have something meaningful to say, so I thought to give him a few minutes to make his case.

“Tessa likes to paint, Ezzie!”

“Yes Daddy, I know! I wouldn’t call it painting really, more a kind of inebriated smearing, but yes, the ‘daisies’, tell me about those Daddy, and all this talk of getting to Ballycumlonely.”

“So, Tessa, you see, she likes to paint nature, green things,” Daddy began, pausing for a pull on his pipe and exhaling a thin jet of smoke as I rolled my eyes.

“Yes Daddy, we’ve covered that.”

“So one day didn’t Patty O’Byrne from the telephone exchange call her up, because Patty is a bit of a gossip you see and she can make free phone calls seeing as how she runs the exchange and her supervisor is up in Dublin so she can do most anything she wants! There’s rumour going around that she listens in to a fair few of the calls that go through the lines, she can do that you see, she has the appropriate technological means, being professionally trained and all!”

“Oh Daddy, not this again! I told you years ago I don’t want to be sitting in a room all day plugging things in and out and dealing with eejits asking for Ballyhoomoloney 3-0 when they mean 0-3 and most of them don’t even want their Tarot read, and I wouldn’t be allowed to even if they did! And as for Patty O’Byrne’s indiscrete predilections, sure every dog in the

street knows she's listened in to every call in and out of Ballyhoomoloney in living memory!"

"Didn't you and Patty O'Byrne used to be friends Ezzie?"

"Daddy, be a dear and tell me what you know about the daisies... or, I mean, at least about how she supposedly got to Ballycumlonely, because if you're not just tripping balls, that might be useful."

Daddy stared quizzically back at me.

"Sorry Daddy, I've lived up in Dublin for some time now, and that's how they talk, but I am rather busy today, so if we could just hurry this up, I'd be grateful, Daddy." I gave him a pat on his free hand and a gentle nod of encouragement.

"So down she went to the south end of Dunphy's field to paint the daisies," he explained, gesturing with his pipe again at the incomprehensible image before him, "and being as such a work as hers takes many hours of effort, well she had to answer a call of nature, uh-hum?" Daddy politely looked to me and I nodded to indicate understanding. "So she hopped over the wall into the trees by the river and she... em..." Daddy blushed, "hitched up her skirt to make good her relief." I nodded again, impressed at Daddy's delicate turn of phrase worthy of the nine o'clock news broadcast from Dublin every evening at seven. Local time I mean.

"And then, didn't her foot slip on a mucky patch and arse over teakettle she went!"

"Into the river?" I enquired impatiently. Daddy smiled knowingly at his impending coup de grâce.

"No, Ezzie... into the turnip aisle in the Aldi in Ballycumlonely!"

"What the hell have you been smoking? Is this one of Patty O'Byrne's nonsense tales you've been enchanted by Daddy? What kind of tripe do you be listening to down in Breeda Donnelly's bar? And here am I, like an eejit wasting time listening to this folly!"

Daddy looked genuinely hurt as though I had betrayed his trust in confiding his tale and I confess I felt a little abashed.

“Well, if you must know, Ezzie, yes it was your friend Patty O’Byrne who overheard it as when Tessa O’Donovan found her way back to Ballyhoomoloney she called to her sister in Donegal to tell her, but once the whole town knew, she had to admit it had happened, thought there’s still some folk think she was picking mushrooms and just passed out and washed downstream, but I believe it’s true, Ezzie, because she told me herself, and it’s undeniable that when she returned she had a new dress from the Marks and Spencer in Ballycumlonely and it wasn’t sopping wet like it would have been if she’d floated downstream!” Daddy implored, “And she was gone for three weeks! Now I know those mushrooms out by Dunphy’s field are good on account of the piggery being upstream and all, but still, Ezzie... three weeks!”

“And is that the abomination she managed to paint that day?” I inquired abruptly, gesturing at the wall.

“No Ezzie, I’ve had that years! It’s from her Daisies series.”

A mix of emotions hung in the air and we sat in silence. As I studied his face, Daddy stared back at me seeming still offended at my disbelief. He was very sure about what he was saying, and he *was* my Daddy after all. There was also the small matter of the millennial motor vehicle being kaput so I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt and rest on the idea overnight.

* * *

It was a cold, damp morning. There was, right enough, a fine array of mushrooms lining the south perimeter of Dunphy’s field and I filled my pockets as I remember Billy Murphy used to devour the blue ones and he’d be up all night, randy as bull chasing an ox, and I could slip Daddy one of the orange ones and he’d sleep soundly through any commotion we might make. I wasn’t too sure, mind, that there was a portal to Ballycumlonely here though, and I was starting to think that Tessa O’Donovan might have, at minimum, accidentally sat on a patch of said mushrooms, which, after their effect descended upon her, caused her to lose her footing while subsequently answering a call of nature, and

perhaps the remainder of her fanciful tale authored itself in the absence of any deception on her part.

So, I'd been up and down the south wall three times now, and I had all the blue and orange mushrooms I could carry, my bag bulging at the seams. Actually, now I think about it, I don't entirely recall if the green ones were poisonous, or were they the cure for haemorrhoids? My memory not being what it used to be, I thought it best to grab a few just in case.

I was about to give up when an irresistible urge accosted me to answer a call of nature. Unfortunately though, the eponymous Willy Dunphy was known as the dirtiest auld codger this side of Finnegans Finagle and I suspected he would be lurking in a copse of trees by his little daub and wattle house at the far corner, probably brandishing his binoculars, so I hitched up my britches and bounded with impressive elegance over the low stone wall, whereupon I couldn't reestablish my footing on the other side and didn't my feet go out from under me and in different directions eliciting a loud 'splat' from the small puddle in which gravity deposited me.

Once I regained my bearings I began to scamper to my feet but, in my semi-cancelled state it proved somewhat difficult to achieve the necessary purchase upon the marshy ground and didn't I begin a slide and tumble down the riverbank! Instinctively I grasped my bag to my bosom, as one's bag is very important whether it be filled with mushrooms or carelessly misplaced silverware, objet d'art and knickknacks that occasionally come into my possession. It pains me when I see the millennials *not* carrying a bag as I weep for the number of opportunities they must miss.

Frantically, I splayed my legs most obscenely, inadvertently ploughing the muck before me into a dandy little furrow that, under different circumstances one could sow parsnips in, and with one last tremendous tumble and a shout of sheer terror I was plummeting to the murky green water made frothy by its exertion on the rocks and rapids acting upon the waste of the piggery some furlongs up the other bank. I closed my mouth and eyes and waited to resurface in some form and after a moment's silence I was compelled to gasp for breath. The air was strangely dry and herbal, devoid of all odour of pig. Flailing my arms around I felt that the

rocks beneath me were soft and fleshy... and dry. I opened my eyes to see the most pathetic, wilted, anaemic vegetable I had ever the misfortune to set eyes upon, and then another, and then an entire crate, each more unappetising than the last. I checked that I still had a hold of my bag, and scanned the area before coming to a face. It was also pale, and a little spotty, and with a big tuft of orange hair protruding atop, it took a moment to distinguish it from the vegetal abominations in which I was now wading, rolling and bouncing as they were all over the tiled floor.

‘Raymond’, the badge read, ‘Happy to help!’ Though the wearer seemed stoically miffed to be helping today.

“Ma’am, I must ask you please not to sit in the turnips!”

“Ma’am! Turnips! I’m not a ma’am dear, I’m *Madamme* Esmerelda Zxeronna, and these things is not turnips, they’re some kind of a rubber ball.”

“Those are premium local turnips, ma’am and it is a contravention of the town’s byelaws to sit upon an uncovered crate of turnips!”

I held one of the miserable things aloft by the yellow strings protruding from its top and grimaced.

“Where in the name of all that is good does anyone call *this* a turnip, let alone pass a byelaw to protect it?”

The face paused a moment and seemed set on its stoical course. “The entire townland, ma’am.”

I stared a moment, formulating my next question before my counterpart volunteered clarification, “Of Ballycumlonely, ma’am.”

“Ballycumlonely? I’m in Ballycumlonely?” I bellowed excitedly, “Wait, isn’t there a turnip shortage in Ballycumlonely?”

“No, ma’am,” the dry humourless voice informed me as a hand appeared and gestured both up and down the multitude of crates all containing the same pitiable spongy white balls.

“Turnips is supposed to be purple though luv, purple with big green stalks jutting out atop, with a creamy golden band of mouthwateringly succulent

flesh above the stringy roots! These things don't even *have* roots!"

My new companion, now appeased somewhat by my no longer reclining upon his turnip display, informed me that he was the manager of the store, and that, whether I had a mind to accept it or not, this was the turnip aisle in the Aldi in Ballycumlonely, and I had to admit, notwithstanding the distressing state of the produce, I had little evidence with which to contest his assertion.

"Perhaps you are accustomed to the *old* style of turnip, the kind we used to import from Ballyhoomoloney? They were also delicious but because of the confusion spell over the land we are cut off from the international turnip market. We did attempt to drive three wagons of prime Ballyhoomoloney turnips, the purple kind, around Molly's Meander but with only partial success, as upon arrival they had all turned into pork sausages," my new friend Raymond informed me, "of which we have plenty!" He smiled and gestured to the rear of the store as though in anticipation of my satisfied departure.

"Can you direct me to the Big Red Barn?" I enquired of Raymond.

"Oh, no ma'am, I have heard of the Big Red Barn, but I believe it is a myth, or if not that, then it is before my time!"

I thought for a moment about my next move, percolating the notion that Raymond may be approaching the end of his usefulness to me.

Suddenly his face brightened. "There's a Tartan Barn!" and then fell sullen again, "There are no purple turnips there either though," he added sadly.

"Tartan you say? What kind of tartan?"

Raymond began an epic search for the correct description of the colour of tartan peculiar to this structure, which I interrupted.

"Is it sortof dank and fetid, like a cloying rotting compost streaked with a vibrant vomit green?"

"Yes, that's it! Green, yes!"

I stared at Raymond for some moments before realising that he was in need of a recap of my original question, his mental resources having been depleted for the remainder of the afternoon by the effort of our conversation.

“Would you mind telling me the way to the Tartan Barn?” I asked politely.

“Well, it’s Saturday, so...” Raymond raised his right hand to stroke the dusting of ginger stubble on his chin, eliciting a slow rasping sound, “So, about a mile out the Bramble Road, past Cullen’s Canter.”

I stared at him long enough that his discomfort prompted him to volunteer, “If you want to wait until tomorrow it’ll be behind the carpark out back!” He gestured again to the sausage aisle, though presumably, this time, for a different reason. “And should you come across any purple turnips, you’ll be sure to let us know?”

“I’ll send a Telex!” I assured him with a pat on the hand, and added, “Raymond, you are a most erudite and articulate young man, and I thank you! Should a day come when the great protection spell be lifted and you might wander through Ballyhoomoloney, just ask for the esteemed Adept of the Tarot, the illustrious and magnificent, Her Eminence Mme. Esmerelda Zxeronna, and in recognition of the great turn you have rendered me I will give you ten percent off.

“First reading only.” I clarified.

“Oh, that’s very kind, ma’am,” Raymond simpered, “but I don’t dabble in such things as the Tarot. I prefer the Oracle cards, in fact we don’t practice the Tarot in Ballycumlonely, there’s an ordinance you see, I mean, there’s a byelaw against it!”

“Right ho!” says I, as I reach down to pick up the most delectable and irresistible specimen of fresh, fragrant, Ballyhoomoloney turnip such as, I’d been informed, wasn’t ordinarily to be had this side of Molly’s Meander. Purple it was around the top, like Billy Murphy bicycle. Creamy white it was around the bottom like... well, like cream, I suppose. The roots, still moist from the ground, swung majestically to and fro beneath it as I lofted it by the thick green stalks protruding out top. This garnered some interest from a few auld hags who had been busy lurking at the end

of the aisle and they now realised I was brandishing the most desirable and unobtainable example of the brassicaceae family of mustard plants this town had seen in some thousands of years. They started shuffling toward me in awe, hands outstretched with intent to fondle.

“A turnip!” one of the hags squealed in delight to which the other added, “A *purple* turnip!” You couldn’t fault their observational skills.

Having no room left in my bag, I plonked the magnificent object down upon the ledge atop the shop display, being sure not to bring it in contact with the repugnant wobbly translucent interlopers that were still scattered about from the happenings of my arrival.

“Manager to till three please! Manager to till three!” the urgent voice bellowed over the intercom at ear-splitting intensity as I turned to effect my egress. Someone would eat well tonight! My cursing skills were as sharp as a tack. And Raymond wasn’t apt to turn up at till three anytime soon. Or anywhere else for that matter. Thinking back now, cursing was too good for him!

TWELVE

What my late friend Raymond had not advised me was that this cursed Bramble Road is twelve miles long and counting, or feels as much anyhow, and if I'd known that Daddy's tale of Tessa O'Donovan's daisies would prove so percipient then I would have worn my walking brogues. You see, in Ballyhoomoloney we say things as they are, whereas in Ballycumlonely they're inclined to gussy up the truth to be closer to what they want and dally about with airs and graces. Thus they have the *Bramble Road* which is indistinguishable from the Muck Road but that it is interminably long and whatever brambles one may find on it are the kind that go right through your shoe rendering it permeable to water and catch the skirt of one's beautiful flowery dress, mine already being in shreds, a tattered sacrifice to the important journey I must complete.

The falling sun was still bright and warm, and steam rose in wisps from the trickling water in the lazy rivulets between the clods of earth on which I tread, the vagaries of my exiled condition weighing on my psyche as I mentally rehearsed my spells of protection and steeled myself for the battle of wits to come.

Suddenly a distant sharp corner encroached upon the sun's glowing disk, a sickly green hue loomed in the distance and soon I was in shadow. This was clearly an astral shadow as the monstrous and shoddy structure of the Tartan Barn was still a mile or more off, but the air here had a cloying, suffocating quality and smelled of rotting parsnips. In the distance, a ringing noise, the call of a siren, beckoned me closer. Well, I say the call of a siren but I imagine this would be what a siren call would sound like were the associated enchantment spell ineffectual as it undoubtedly was

given that my archenemies, the detestable Trianala Zerces, couldn't cast a spell to Inter Cert level and had instead pursued an illustrious career as an Oracle card reader, the Tarot being too advanced for her. It was a combination of the ringing one gets after a blow to the head and the noise of an angry cat escaping a cardboard box. "Come, kind stranger. Rescue me!" it conveyed, though in a tone that induced one to retch, thus likely accounting for the continued incarceration of the foul fiend, trapped as she was at the epicentre of the confusion spell that I had... that had lamentably befallen the land. Yes, the eye of the spell was close now, and I checked my bag for the magical object that would put rest to this creature's meddling in my affairs.

Rounding the corner of the pungent, decrepit ruins of the old pigsty I pondered how so much dung could accumulate in the absence of any live animals, as no animal could live here, the power of the confusion spell being too great. I ventured through the gate and at the side of the barn I found... nothing. The well was gone! The air shimmered with the rotting smell which, at this intensity, no longer resembled parsnips but had achieved an altogether demonic character. The scratching, shrill pleading came from all directions as I ventured cautiously inside.

The barn was empty. The old hay had rotted to a slimy brown carpet that coated the ground and oozed about underfoot. The trilling, scratching noise the character of effluent trickled down from the loft at the back of the barn. A ladder ascended thereto, the wood deteriorated to the point that it was purely decorative, but in my ephemeral state of near-total cancelation I figured it may support my weight, and rightly it did. There, hand on heart, dear reader, was the well. How it got up there I don't surely know, but it must cause one great admiration for the skill of the adept who cast this confusion spell... whoever that might be. I steeled myself for the task now imminent, took a deep breath, and finding the air thick and slimy I aborted the attempt, settling instead for a few short gasps to sustain me but no more.

The crooning was pitiable! "Dear stranger! Come and free me from my prison and all the bitcoins I will pay to you!"

“How many bitcoins do you have?” I call out confidently, the effort of speech causing me to gag in the heady cloud of desperation and filth that pervaded this place.

There was silence for some moments as the creature awoke to my presence, her prior pleadings being, I suspect, an automatic diatribe that had played on repeat for some thousands of years.

At first gravelly, as though unaccustomed to using different words, confused, sickly sweet and stomach-churning, the voice intoned with evident curiosity, “Who are *you*?”

And now the game was afoot. Mme. Esmerelda Zxeronna, warrior of light, The Greatest Healer who Ever Lived, versus the beast from the well, the abominable and odious Mme. Trianala Zerces or *First Lady of the Oracle* as it liked to pronounce itself.

“Ezzie, is that you?”

It recognised me!

“Why yes dear Triana, it is I, as you observe, your friend Ezzie. Oh my! How I ache from my epic journey, an ache not greater than that caused by the sadness of my being unable to return sooner, to rescue you from your unfortunate confinement so you may resume your place as the venerable First Lady of the Oracle, in your rightful station atop the earth where your great works are so needed in this troubled time!”

“Actually if you could just get me out of the well, that’s really all I need Ezzie,” the pleading voice clarified, “you’ve been gone quite a long time, Ezzie, since the billygoat upended me into the well, were you witness to what happened?”

“Oh yes, it was a terrible accident! I fear the poor billygoat must have had a grudge against you Triana, for one moment you were plunging your ladle into the well to retrieve for me a refreshing drink of brackish water, an act most infused with gracious kindness, and at that instant, as though enervated by the appearance of your looming posterior, partly exposed by the whimsy of the fickle breeze acting upon your pretty green skirt, the billygoat did loose his tether and, in a tremendous act of animal vigour he

barrelled across the courtyard and upended you into the mouth of the well!" I explained.

"Erm, yes, well, I had guessed that much Ezzie, but, erm, did you have anything to do with that?"

"Erm... No," I assured her.

"And why did you take so long to rescue me?" the voice inquired suspiciously.

"Well, I had to subdue the billygoat, didn't I? And then I went for help! And then there was the Toba volcano! And I figured you'd be better off somewhere safe! And then I had to protect the people of the Five Counties from the smoke and ash, and then I was busy repopulating the earth with my new husband, and now I'm a successful healer about the work of restoring humanity to its scintillating peak of glory again!"

"Oh," the voice asked, "how's that going?"

"Not well," I concede, "you see we have this thing called a millennial... it's sortof like a person but, overall, a very problematic one."

"A millennial... like Jamesie?"

"Erm, yes, like Jamesie!"

"They're not problematic, Ezzie, you just don't understand them! I've been communing with them over the 4G for years and I find them skilful and erudite."

"Ah, yes, they *are* erudite, this is true, but that's only because I've been influencing them!" I corrected, "Nevertheless that's not the purpose of my journey here today! I'm here to rescue you using this... erm... rope!" I announce in my most reassuring tone, reaching into my bag to extract my roll of aluminium foil fabric earlier procured from Ali Express.

"Oh Ezzie! Thank you! Just drop it down and I'll grab onto it! I've lost a bit of weight you see, as I only have sphagnum moss and slugs to eat down here, so it should be no trouble to pull me up! Ezzie, you are a dear friend, you are truly!"

Some minutes passed as I stretch yards of shiny metallic fabric off the roll, waiting for the inevitable inquiry to resonate up the wellshaft.

“Ezzie, I don’t see a rope yet!”

“Oh no! Oh Triana, I’m so desperately sorry, something’s gone wrong!”

“Whaaaat?” it screeched.

“Oh no, I feared this might happen!” I gasp most convincingly, not laughing even a little, “You see Triana, I can’t work the rope! It just slips through my fingers!”

“Whaaaat?”

“Oh, I didn’t want to burden you with this Triana, given as your burden is already so weighty, being, as you are, down a well and all! But you see I’m not in good health! Some terrible sickness has come over me! I’m but an astral shadow of my former self you see, my corporeal apparatus has faded into a translucence and all my spells have failed to remedy the situation for I know not the cause of my malaise, and thus I am unable to treat it!”

The creature was suspiciously silent, so I continued, “I sought advice from my sister Estralaada! You remember Estralaada don’t you?”

“The one with the crystals?”

“Yes, that’s right, the one with the crystals,” I reply feigning a subdued veneration, “and she has indoor plumbing too!”

An approving grunt emanated from the depths and I continued, “Estralaada gave me a crystal to supplement my etherial energy by channelling my base chakra directly into my solar plexus, augmenting the frequency of my core vibration to unblock my soul energy, liberating it into my aura in the hopes of solidifying my corporeal form.”

“Does it work?”

“No,” I lied.

“I fear my withering form was an advantage as I nimbly navigated the Bramble Road to get to you, but now I find that I am unable to operate the

apparatus that could effectively liberate you from your confinement!” I sob openly, for I seem to be ahead, and thus I decide to go all-in.

“The rope?”

“Yes luv, the rope!”

“What a terrible sickness!” the voice croons with what appears to be a conflicted tone.

“Oh yes, it’s terrible, and since you know now, and I hand’t intended to bother you with this... well I only have another day to live... at least that’s what Estralaada pronounces! That’s why I expedited myself to your side most precipitously for I feared that, should I wait any longer, I would have passed into oblivion and I couldn’t bear the thought of your being stuck down there for all eternity!”

A silence fell over the loft, so I added a few sobs for good measure, followed by a wail and that did the trick.

“Oh, no, Ezzie, no, I’ve made a terrible mistake!”

“By falling down the well?” I enquire facetiously.

“No, Ezzie, no! I have a confession to make! You see in my journeys, riding, as I do, in the clicks and pauses of the 4G signal, between the pictures of cats and various anatomical depictions, well I realised that the millennials have mastery of the most powerful curse ever known!”

“A powerful curse?” I gasp in feigned surprise.

“Yes,” the voice sobbed regretfully, “they call it *cancelling*! It’s a very powerful curse Ezzie, amongst the most powerful ever known!”

“Yes, you mentioned that,” I prompt, glancing at my watch, “now what’s all this got to do with me?”

“Oh, one can’t be certain! But were the millennials to cancel you, well the symptoms would be much as you describe!”

“Oh dear, so you mean...”

“Wait! Just give me a few minutes!” the creature chirped with urgency, and I perched myself on the side of the well at a point that seemed less

crumbling than the rest, to await the fruition of my ingenious plan.

“And I’ve made a terrible mistake!” the voice spoke softly, not to me, but into the 4G, “The venerable Mme. Esmerelda Zxeronnna is *not* responsible for my tumbling down the well! I know this because she has been labouring tirelessly to find a way through the powerful confusion spell to liberate me from my imprisonment! She is truly a great friend and I was hasty to accuse her of misdoings! I am deeply regretful of my misjudgement and humbly ask all millennials in good standing to *un*-cancel her with immediate effect!”

“Are you alright down there luv?” I enquire.

“Oh yes, I just have to do a little dance on the TikTok, won’t be a minute!”

After some more mumblings and a wet shuffling of feet I hear a noise from the bottom of my bag, ‘bleep-bleep-bloop!’ followed by a quizzical voice from below, “Are you feeling any better now, Ezzie?”

“Erm, I’m just having a little sit down luv!”

“But, are you feeling any *stronger* Ezzie?”

“Why would I feel stronger?” I ask, suppressing a giggle as I immediately feel the blood return to my extremities, my translucent pallor taking on a renewed inky solidity and I knew with monumental glee, *I’d been un-cancelled by the millennials!*

Haha! Now we’re talking!

“Can you throw down the rope now Ezzie? Be sure to tie it to something good and solid!”

“I have a better idea luv! Sit tight!”

I’d already laid out five long sheets of foil fabric just like I saw on the you-vision-tube, and I proceeded to patch them together with carpet tape.

“A *better* idea Ezzie? What’s that then? Can’t you throw down the rope and get me out of this rotten well?”

“Patience luv, patience!” I reassure the creature as I draw the glistening sheet over the mouth of the well, folded it down around the crumbling

damp stone and begin my final application of tape.

“Ezzie, it’s getting very dark! How are you coming with the rope?”

“The millennials would call that an *assist*!” I inform, tangentially.

“Yes, I know Ezzie, but... Wait! What are you doing Ezzie?”

Twelve trips around the well and I’ve run out of tape, so I retrieve a few rocks from the ground and place them atop my construction lest it be dislodged by a breeze or curious rodent, and *voila*, one regulation Faraday Cage, invented by Michael Faraday in 1836, repurposed for the benefit of humankind, on this day, by Mme. Esmerelda Zxeronnna Johnson Lee Lewis III. Go Zxeronnna!

“I’ve lost my 4G signal!” the creature bellowed from beneath its foil prison which quivered percussively at the sheer force of her realisation.

“Well, yes, that’s the idea luv, it’s a Faraday Cage, invented by Micheal Faraday in 1836! It’ll ensure you can do no more meddling with the 4G and you’ll no longer be able to inhabit my millennial consort Jamesie!”

“But Ezzie, I un-cancelled you!”

“I know luv, but that also means that you’re the one who cancelled me in the first place, and you know what a cynical and unforgiving nature I have, remember?”

From beneath the glittering magic foil seal an immense, guttural and demonic growl commenced and grew in intensity, causing two timbers to dislodge and fall to the ground with a clatter leaving a gaping hole in the wall of the Tartan Barn through which the last rays of the setting sun penetrated, illuminating the dank loft as I beat a hasty retreat down the decrepit ladder, the final rung giving way under my restored corporeal mass, and depositing me unceremoniously upon my bottom on the squelchy, fetid ground.

“I’ll curse you, Esmerelda Zxeronnna, I’ll curse you and all your works, straight to hell!” continued the tirade from above.

“You couldn’t curse a lame donkey in a mushroom fit luv and the millennials can’t help you now!”

Angry though it was, the creature was contained, and now, denied access to its precious 4G signal, could trouble neither me nor Millennial Jamesie any further. Well, I mean, I *hope*, I wonder now, does a Faraday Cage also stop the 5G? Presumably it does, yes, I'm sure it does.

THIRTEEN

It was Thursday two weeks later when I left the barn, time being dilated what with it being the epicentre of the confusion spell and all. Curious as this was, it had the advantage that the damnable Bramble Road was nowhere to be found. Instead, the Tartan Barn appeared to perch upon a high stony peak and below my feet were swirling white clouds. I began by trotting around the barn but the situation looked no better on any side so I had no choice but to pick a direction and descend, and so into the misty clouds I went and after some hours I found myself in the shadow of the Enchanted Forest separating Ballyhoomoloney and Ballycumlonely. Now, this might seem auspicious, but there's a catch. The Enchanted Forest is known to be impenetrable. It's rumoured that Tessa O'Donovan once tried to take a shortcut through the Enchanted Forest to get to the Krispy Kreme in Ballycumlonely for her sister was visiting from Dublin and, being a fussy cow, she felt that Dunkin' Donuts wouldn't be snooty enough to impress upon her the distinguished station that the esteemed artist had achieved, but before she'd even lost sight of daylight she had a vision of Fr. Brophy with his hands waving about in the air as though performing an exorcism, a common occurrence since the quarry behind Kelly's Bog had struck a seam of brimstone, and kneeling before him was Bláithín Ó Súilleabháin and she was mumbling and talking in tongues and Fr. Brophy was shouting, "More tongue! More tongue!" and then he turned and saw Tessa and, in a moment of distraction he was overpowered by the daemon and began convulsing horribly and Bláithín Ó Súilleabháin was trying to extract the daemon from him and he was praying, "Oh God! Oh God!" and Tessa, taking such a fright, forgetting all about her donuts did turn on her heels and ran all the way back to the parochial house in

Ballyhoomoloney to tell Fr. Brophy of the vision of him she had encountered in the forest, lest it be a foreshadowing of terrible things to come, but he wasn't home, though his housekeeper assured her that she would convey the message, but that there wasn't much to worry about as Fr. Brophy was known to keep a keen eye on Bláithín Ó Súilleabháin and was probably well on top of her predicament on a regular basis and that if anything were of concern in the Enchanted Forest it would be the time Willy Tiernan's son Manachy was lured there by a mischievous sprite who proceeded to take carnal liberties with him until he lost consciousness then transformed into Billy Downey who had also, from the other side of the forest, been simultaneously lured by a faerie of the Fae People of the woods who seduced him into illicit embrace which, after some hours of entrancement, saw him awaken in the arms of Manachy Tiernan at the very moment that Willy Tiernan was picking mushrooms for breakfast and had, himself, been seduced beyond the edge of the forest by a talking fox who assured him that the most delectable mushrooms lay but a few yards beyond the broken bough of a fallen oak. Now Willy was quite adamant that both boys were very clear they were in intimate embrace with one of the faeries who had tricked them prior to their being disturbed, rather than being mutually entangled as they had been found, but when Garda Hannifin investigated he discovered that Willy had accidentally picked the blue mushrooms, the light being poor under the canopy, and hadn't it been very lucky that he hadn't taken them home for breakfast after all, and Manachy Tiernan and Billy Downey remained firm friends for years thereafter.

Now, I have my doubts about this, for, first of all, while the Faerie Folk are commonplace in these parts I have yet to encounter a talking fox, and I have my suspicions about the veracity of the tale, suspecting instead that Willy Downey had stumbled into the forest in deliberate search of, not its epicurean treasures, but likely seeking the very blue mushrooms he was found with that are known to cause priapism, for his wife Biddy was not the prettiest of her four sisters, being an only child as she was, and if I were Willy Tiernan and had married her for her father's money I feel that I too might be in need of the occasional blue mushroom were I matrimonially obligated to her.

Now, poor Tessa had taken a terrible fright and Fr. Brophy, upon his return, said he'd write to Rome for instructions upon her vision but claimed later that the Pope wrote back to say that she should stop with her nonsense and focus on minding her own business and maybe some hobbies, and it was within a year that she had produced her very popular series of paintings on the subject of daisies one of which she gifted to Daddy and one of the remaining which hangs in The Louvre, so overall she did okay on foot of her vision and learned a valuable lesson to take the long way around Molly's Meander the next time she has a hankering to visit Ballycumlonely.

Perched on a rock on the edge of the forest, I was surveying the tree line, pondering which spell I might cast to hasten my journey through the Enchanted Forest when I felt a movement in my bosom. Seeing as how Billy Murphy was back in Ballyhoomoloney many miles south I was momentarily perplexed as to the source of the rhythmic oscillations. With some trepidation I loosed my cleavage and with a frightful suddenness didn't Estralaada's protective crystal leap out and, straining its string taut, it appeared to be vehemently indicating a direction off to the south where there was a bite in the trees which, to me, looked like the direction I would rather *not* go in but then I heard Estralaada's voice whispering to me on the breeze.

"Trust the crystal magic, Ezzie!"

Right ho, into the trees I went and, entering exactly where the crystal had indicated, it promptly fell inert and I tucked it back into my blouse. Everything seemed quite mundane in the Enchanted Forest and presently I had forded a stream, leapt a badger's den under the root of an elm tree, and was happily assured that, with Estralaada's help I would be home in Billy's embrace by nightfall with my supply of mushrooms, a few of which I recall were the priapic variety, not that Billy Murphy needed such things, given as he was a prodigious consumer of asparagus, but maybe *I* did, if you follow my drift. Further I'd be free of the detestable influence of the Zerces creature and could plan my return to Dublin life with my millennial consort now entirely devoted to *my* enchantment and no further bothersome interference. Go Zxeronna!

Now, the Enchanted Forest was not living up to its name, but that was fine by me, I did wish though that it had been at least enchanted enough to sport a Starbucks or two, even a Costa would suffice, a Tesco Express would have been delightful, for my stomach protested violently that it hadn't eaten since morning when I had a big bowl of pudding and turnips to fuel my search for Tessa O'Donovan's daisies, a search which, despite Daddy's unwittingly accurate protestations, I had not expected to bear fruit, and it didn't, so to speak, as it bore mushrooms instead, which any great healer will tell you are fungi. The search had deposited me in Ballycumlonely though, and precipitated the achievement of my greatest end as herein related, but I regret discarding my beautiful creamy white and purple turnip that I had... *acquired* as it would make a tremendously satisfying snack about now. Nevertheless I had the fungi, and it must be said I should probably accept that this was better than nothing, and avoiding the blue ones which would fetch a high price down the pub Saturday, and remembering, as any great healer will tell you, the yellow ones are generally innocuous, I proceeded to slake my ravenous hunger in the absence of the garlic butter and za'atar. Oh crap! That reminds me, the millennial is out of za'atar.

It was then that I landed face first in the muck. I know... I just *know* that the roots of that tree moved in such a manner as to intercept my gait, and it was only by a minor grace that I avoided landing on my bag and irreparably squashing its valuable contents.

“Whaaaaat?” I exclaimed in surprise as I extricated myself from the pool of thick muck in which fate had deposited me, and pausing not even to brush off my dress, for it wouldn't have helped, I made to resume my journey so as to best emerge the other side of this forest before any further misfortune should befall me. Upon righting myself, however, I noticed that I had been turned around, as the way I was to resume my travels was barred by a mesh of branches emanating from two large oak trees and, entangled as they were, they formed an obstruction through which a madamme of my accomplished girth would be unable to wriggle. Feeling that I must have become confused as to my direction, I sought to reorient myself by pirouetting about in search of egress, but three of the four directions were obstructed, and the only route open to me led into a dark

glut of trees unnaturally dense relative to the rest of the woodland. With a sinking feeling in my stomach I realised that the forest had business with me, and my only consolation was, well, it must be said that nobody ever entered the Enchanted Forest and subsequently *failed* to return, in fact more people were lost in the history of Ballyhoomoloney (which it should be noted goes back only 83,577½ years, seeing as *I* was the one to invent writing in my twenties, thus making history technically possible) in unfortunate falls from Finnegan's Finagle by unwary folk who had worn the wrong shoes for the journey to Connelly's Corner in search of the post office, or, having survived the crossing, drowned in the brackish waters while trying to slip through the boglands to sally upon Ballykettle Cross from the south by Redmond's sheep farm or, it might be speculated, found the business end of Red Redmond's shotgun as they tried to grab a fistful of the most delightful medicinal plants that Red grew for sale on the local black market, seeing as Ballykettle Cross, which is known as the Riviera of Ballyhoomoloney, having as it does a beautiful bog-coast with muck-beaches, an equestrian centre, horse meat restaurant (very fancy) and a visitors' information kiosk, is home to the elite folk who have made good for themselves like my sister Estralaada upon whom I previously elucidated has indoor plumbing, and potentially like I, myself, were I not engaged with my millennial consort Jamesie up in Dublin, and if I had any money, which I'm sure I'll get in his last will and testament seeing as how he has a stash of bitcoins somewhere in the attic, though he won't tell me where exactly.

“WHO DARES ENCROACH UPON MY ENCHANTED FOREST?” the voice bellowed from all around, swirling about me and raising a flurry of leafy detritus from the woodland floor, dancing a fluttery jig in the fecund shadows and settling again, as though with embarrassment, to the ground.

I steeled myself, for I knew bullies in my life and, enchanted or not, this one wasn't going to get the better of me.

“I'm Madame Esmerelda Zxeronna, Adept of the Tarot and The Greatest Healer who Ever Lived! I shall be afforded all respect due my station, wisdom and accomplishments and I require safe passage through

your great forest such that I may return home to Ballyhoomoloney to resume my..."

"Well, you're going the wrong way then luv! Nothing down there but the abandoned house of ill repute."

"Whaaaat?" I enquired with surprise.

"Their shenanigans were keeping me awake all night so, being enchanted as I am, put an end to it."

"Oh!" I mused, "So *you're* the one responsible for the mysterious herpes outbreak of '36?"

A resonating laugh emanated from the dense trees which rustled in their high branches as though parting precipitously as a fine beam of green light from the canopy above cut the air surgically, illuminating what appeared to be a carved wooden throne, upon which sat, for lack of a better term, an amorphous wisp of smoke. It had no features, and definitely no mouth, though it was smiling... at least astrally.

"No, that wasn't me, Ezzie. And I think you know that!"

"How would I know that?" I asked, suppressing my defensive tone, though too late.

"Don't you remember me?" the voice asked cautiously, now more personable and confined in origin to the bright ornate wooden throne.

"Erm. Err. Yes luv!" I lied, causing a long awkward silence.

"I'm the spirit of the forest," the voice advised, "I used to visit you when you were a little girl not a thousand years old!"

"Well, luv, a lot of men visited me when I was only a thousand years old, my services were legendarily popular back then," I chortled, "I mean, to have their Tarot read."

"Ah yes, the Tarot!" the spirit mused, "And how did you learn to read the Tarot?"

I paused, looking for the trick in the question, realising that I didn't actually know, I had just assumed that I'd invented it.

“And who taught you that the blue mushrooms treat erectile dysfunction? And who showed you how to make wormwood tincture to cure the Black Death?”

“Whaaaat? Wait! You said that would cure *bad breath*!”

“I’m the quiet inspirational voice in your head Ezzie! I’m the reason you became The Greatest Healer who Ever Lived!”

“Oh! About that...”

“But you’ve lost your way, haven’t you Ezzie? You’ve used your powers in pursuit of pecuniary fancy!”

“Erm, well one has to help oneself to be able to help others!” I protested rationally.

“Perhaps,” the voice mused playfully, “but one does quite a bit of cursing too, doesn’t one?”

“Whaaaat?”

“Poor Billy Murphy! His heart is pure, and you’ve cursed him within sight of his deathbed!” the tone deepened to resonating import, “And the Shelbourne incident, Ezzie!”

“Yes, erm, the less said about that the better, luv. Misunderstandings will happen a time or two.”

“They had to close the jacuzzi for two weeks after, Ezzie!”

“So, what about it then?” I bellowed impatiently, approaching my wit’s end with this diatribe, “What is it you’re gettin’ at exactly?”

Immediately I regretted my hubris as the misty swirl occupying the throne stirred into purposeful motion, extruding an arm, complete with clenched fist that approached me apace, the index finger extending accusingly at me until it was but a foot from my face and I was frozen in anticipation, then the finger, cold and damp, pressed against my forehead. A tingling sensation enveloped me and the world went dark. I could feel the soft ground rising to meet me and then there was silence.

For what seemed like hours it was as though I were being massaged by the darkness around me and my thoughts were silent. The soundless

cottony black enveloped me and I was at peace. By the time the vision came I was quite attached to my new situation, but, beyond my control and against my will, the black curtains parted and I was propelled through as though pushed by a large, soft, leafy hand. I clutched my bag close.

* * *

The dingy single bed creaked under Billy's modest weight. I didn't recognise the room.

"She's gone!" he blubbered, "I love her and she's gone and left me!"

"She was no good for you Billy, she was never any good for anyone, you know this!"

Anger rose in Billy's face as he turned to gaze painfully at his ethereal companion who was just out of my view beyond the boundary of the scene, his cheeks puffed up as he drew breath, paused to gather his strength and, with great effort he roared, though with less effect than perhaps he intended, "You'll not speak that way about my Ezzie!" He drew another breath and after some effort he added, "She's a great healer, The Greatest Healer who Ever Lived, and she's..."

His head snapped back to the foot of his bed, just beyond which I was positioned, and his eyes softened. He sat perfectly still until one acid tear tumbled down his cheek to disappear in the tattered fabric of the bedclothes.

"She's the love of my life!"

Although Billy's companion sat outside the piteous scene, a disembodied voice in a bad play by an underfunded theatre group without quite enough actors to fill every part, there was nevertheless a sigh from that direction to convey the destitution of poor Billy's predicament.

"I know she was a cursing bitch!" The exclamation, sudden, resentful, exhausted him. "I know she's the one who bewitched Sally Brady's donkey to kick me in the head so she could capture it with that infernal magic moving picture box to take back to the millennials in Dublin so they could all laugh at me! And I know she's gone. She's beyond the

confusion spell now, and she's lost to me. But I still love her! My beautiful cursing Ezzie in the flowery dress."

"But she's cursed you *to death* Billy! You've got to let her go! You'll never survive her if you love her Billy, that's the power she has over you!"

There was silence as the scene grew bright to a scintillating caustic white and Billy Murphy's voice echoed his parting sentiment, "I know! But I love her with all that's left in my heart!"

Now there appeared a path in the woods before me. I felt my feet beneath me again, and I was compelled to walk forward though the way was obscured in a bright white mist. After some steps I stopped as I sensed an obstruction. The haze withdrew and I saw that the path had reached a fork. To the left, the track became rocky and twisted sickeningly as though space distorted, horrible knurled trees loomed overhead, their branches terminating in slimy tendrils that slithered toward me as thought in pretence, appearing slaves to the wind, though with an animation not natural so as to be convincingly innocent though they were unable to penetrate the protective mist that gathered around me, insulating me from their assault. In the dim light I could make out a wooden stake in the earth listing under the weight of the sign it hoisted. Rotting and split along its length it bore the words 'The Darkness'. A faint growling noise emanated from beyond the twist in the path, reminding me somewhat of Daddy's snoring in his armchair by the fire, but with a menacing character and volume.

To the right the path also lead away, twisting tantalisingly out of view. Birdsong wafted up this path. Sunlight warmed it in a bright yellow glow though the sun itself was not visible. A baby deer peered at me curiously from between two ash trees which lay behind tastefully painted white rocks that lined the edges of the track. Bright green moss grew around the painted rocks most delightfully. Thinking it might be hallucinogenic, and remembering that I had exercised the presence of mind to bring my bag, I approached and plucked some handfuls, stuffing them in the tear in the lining until it reached capacity thus segregating the moss from the precious fungi. One must always bring one's bag, especially to visions administered at the discretion of the Spirit of the Enchanted Forest as one

knows not what treasures one might find there, or in the dining room of the Shelbourne, or any random sitting room, Spar or Centra for that matter. Treasures abound, and are often unguarded.

Behind me, there was a rustling in the leaves and a voice announced, “Ezzie, you must make your choice!”

Before I could respond I was awoken by a tremendous shaking of the earth. My head was on fire in spiteful pain and my eyes would not respond to my impulse to open them. The shaking continued and I began to feel my legs, first at the feet, then the knees, then I realised my bottom was firmly planted most unpleasantly in a puddle of mud and my shoulders were being raised by a strong arm that alternately pulled at and shook me.

It was then I heard the most beautiful and timely sound, a melodious voice, full of gentle caring and simple concern, demanding nothing of me but that I respond to indicate my general condition, specifically that I be alright. My eyes finally opened and a bright sunbeam, a real one this time, penetrated the canopy and illuminated my angel, a halo circling his dark greasy hair, making him undulate brightly in contrast to the woodland hues around us. He spoke softly and shook me again.

“Would you give it a bloody rest, Billy, I’m shaken enough. I’m not a feckin’ margarita!”

“Oh, Ezzie, we were so worried about you! Your Daddy told me you had a double serving of pudding and turnip for breakfast instead of Special K and then set off in the direction of Dangling Rock and I was suspicious because you only ever go there with me because you say that it’s full of ants and they get in your knickers but when I’m there you don’t need knickers but I know you’re only joking and you’re just afraid of the pishogue you think is upon it from the time you met the leprechaun there but you was only high on Biddy Downey’s magic cupcakes, and then there’s no Dangling Rock anymore as it fell and rolled all the way down Finnegan’s Finagle and killed Frank Quinn’s best mule, broke Charlie Doyle’s leg and startled Patty O’Byrne who went back to the telephone exchange and called in help from Ballykettle Cross to join the search, but it’s then that I realised that, if you weren’t headed for Dangling Rock, you’d probably be off somewhere in a similar direction, so I asked your

Daddy to tell me everything that happened the night before, so he told me about the conversation ye had about Tessa O'Donovan's daisies at the bottom of Dunphy's field so I didn't know why you'd be off there but I figured it'd be in the same way as Dangling Rock so it'd be best to give it a try but we didn't find anything there either and it was then that Fr. Brophy said that he'd take Bláithín Ó Súilleabháin down to the edge of the Enchanted Forest for a few hours to have a look around but on the way they met Manachy Tiernan and Billy Downey who had just come back from foraging and they said that there was a strange glow over the trees about a mile in, and all the animals were running out of the forest!"

Billy fell silent. I was sitting up now and I surveyed his athletic frame. He was a little thin around the middle given that all he was ever wont to eat was asparagus, mutton chops and stone cakes with nettle jam, but he was a fine figure of a man nevertheless. I reached down to the waistband of his grubby pants, soiled as they were with the various vegetal smearings of the forest from his long hectic search and I grasped and pulled hard on the thick serpentine rope tied around him, seeing that it trailed back through the trees. Without prompting, Billy explained, with just a touch of satisfaction, "Manachy Tiernan and Billy Downey wouldn't come into the forest to search for you, it's not their fault, they were just afraid, they never go beyond the mushroom patch where the tumbled tree blocks the path, that's where the enchanted part of the forest begins they say, but I tied a rope around me so that I could find my way back once I'd rescued you!"

"How did you know I'd be in *here* though Billy?"

"I just *knew* Ezzie. If there was anyone who'd be given to be frolicking about the Enchanted Forest with glowing lights frightening the animals, it'd be you Ezzie."

"I don't know how I got here Billy, unless it was the Spirit of the Enchanted Forest who expedited my journey."

"No, you've been wandering in a fever dream Ezzie, but it's alright, I'm here now!"

“Right ho then! Grab that rope and let’s get out of here.” I prompt,
“Where are we going to come out of the forest Billy?”

Billy’s face went blank as he asked torpidly, “Where do you *want* to come out Ezzie.”

I rolled my eyes to heaven and tried again, remembering that he had just saved me.

“Well, how far into the forest *are* we Billy?”

“Oh, *very* far Ezzie!”

“So where is the rope tied to Billy? Did you tie it to the tumbled tree?” I enquired with deliberate slowness.

“No Ezzie.”

“Well what did you tie it to then?”

“Why would I do that Ezzie?”

“So that we can follow it back out Billy!” I explained.

“Oh. It was too short for that Ezzie.”

“Oh Billy! Ya feckin’ eejit!”

He raised his deep brown eyes to mine and I got a tingle all down my back thinking of what he’d be wanting to do later. He raised his hand to my forehead and brushed away my hair and I knew he wanted to kiss me, but had he really earned it? I’d have to think about that, best to play hard to get I say!

FOURTEEN

It was late when we got to Quigley's Corner. Sergeant Quigley had little use for the barn, though he'd inherited it from his cousin when he emigrated to Donegal, so Quigley's Barn is where we had our monthly town céilí. Tonight, though, a special gathering had convened to celebrate my safe return to Ballyhoomoloney.

Fr. Brophy and Bláithín Ó Súilleabháin were the centre of attention as they related their heroic dash to the forest, meeting Manachy Tiernan and Billy Downey, and being instrumental in the whole process of locating and rescuing me. Patty O'Byrne had recovered from her ordeal of being mildly startled by the collapse of Dangling Rock, and the group consented to table a motion at the next town meeting renaming it to 'Fallen Rock', though Patty O'Donovan, being in opposition on sentimental grounds, insisted it should be eponymously christened 'Kid's Rock' in memory of Frank Quinn's mule who was tragically killed in the incident.

Charlie Doyle was attempting to take credit for the entire exercise, despite that he had spent most of his time with Timmy Noonan and Donny Dunphy in the back snug of O'Reilly's pub, attempting to form a rescue committee but, upon the arrival of Cormac Quinn, the town's solicitor and smartest man, (well the smartest one who hadn't been packed off to Dublin for being *too* smart) they had lost track of the objective and began planning the incorporation of the Ballyhoomoloney and Environs Citizens' Rescue Association to deal with situations just like this, such as, for example, the time Willie, Cormac's Dog, had gone missing and the time that Lilly Duffy-Rooney (a big cheese in the local dairy industry) got stuck in the middle of Kelly's Bog having a picnic when the tide came in,

and the helicopter from Dublin was having its rotors polished and was out of commission for the week. They'd just gotten to the point of asking Daddy if they could leverage the services of Benny, his favourite clairvoyant pig, to divine my whereabouts, and possibly put him on retainer for future emergencies, when Danny Nolan of the local hardware store had had enough of listening to them and went with Sally Maguire down to Breeda Donnelly's bar whereupon, en route, she got into a fight with Tessa O'Donovan who always suspected that she was having an affair with her husband who visits the market in Ballykettle Cross more often than is necessary and regularly comes home smelling of Chanel No. 5 which, she correctly asserts, only a hussy from Ballykettle Cross such as Sally Maguire could afford.

Meanwhile, Enoch MacCurtin, the founder of the Ballyhoomoloney Players theatre group, was enticing Jimmy Quinn to join, promising him that when he wrote a play about my loss and subsequent rescue, Jimmy would get the starring role, which I can only imagine would be the role of me, Madame Esmerelda Zxeronna, and Jimmy, being artistic as he was, seemed to be swayed, especially when told that Manachy Tiernan, Billy Downey and Molly Brophy were already on board, though Manachy did point out that because Jimmy worked in the blacksmith's shop his physique was too muscular to play the starring role and he'd be better to play the hero of the tale, Billy Murphy, perhaps leaving the role of Mme. Zxeronna to Molly who, lesbian though she was, was a woman, which might be more consistent with the character. The five of them were less than a minute from an all out brawl over casting when Seán Óg McGrath, the Mayor of Ballyhoomoloney, ever the diplomat, intervened to avoid social disintegration.

Of course the real rescue was spearheaded by Billy Murphy himself, with some help from Garda Hannifin who loaned him the rope, for all the good that did! In fairness though, Billy Brophy's tractor was on standby should I be found stuck in the bog, but what kind of eejit would get stuck in a bog?

We were about an hour in, when Sergeant Quigley and Dr. Mulligan graced us with their presence and Seán Óg McGrath pounced upon the

group of influential men leaving Manachy Tiernan, Billy Downey, Molly Brophy and Jimmy Quinn to amiably debate if they even *needed* to join Enoch MacCurtin's Ballyhoomoloney Players seeing as they were the totality of the membership of the Ballyhoomoloney LGBTQ+ chapter anyhow, and whether it might be easier for Enoch to join *them* instead. Enoch protested that he didn't know how to do that, and his wife supported him in this assertion, but all were in agreement that he would learn, and really it was the artistic endeavour that mattered most.

And right enough, given thirty minutes and two pints of stout each later, Seán Óg as Mayor, Sergeant Quigley, Lilly Duffy-Rooney for the Farmers' Guild, Danny Nolan for the Retailers' Association and Cormac Quinn Esquire, in their collective capacity as the Town Committee made it known that they would make an impromptu address. The matter of my rescue was recognised, and a great thanks was given on behalf of the whole town for the coordinated response that had resulted in my recovery from the forest. Billy and I let that one pass, but then things went downhill.

First, Tommy Noonan, who felt under-thanked for his role in the events of the last few days, shouted opprobriously about the difficulty that the turnip farmers were having. Ballyhoomoloney had, for some time now, been the producer of artisan turnips as recognised by our official town dish and coat of arms, and my personal favourite food on special occasions, the pickled turnip and bacon sandwich. However delectable our turnips were though, and they were unsurpassed, the difficulty of exporting them was crippling as the only way to get them to Ballycumlonely, a town with witheringly poor turnips, previously our biggest target for turnip exports, was to pile them in rickety carts and drive them around Molly's Meander, which, apart from being a circuitous route, was also fraught with danger and many men had been killed on the turnip run in recent years. Also, as I knew from my recent experience, all the crates of turnips that made it around Molly's Meander, which was only about a quarter of those dispatched at best, had the sad misfortune of transmuting into pork sausages under the pernicious influence of the confusion spell, and these were not prized by consumers in

Ballycumlonely who then had to subsist on the fetid, soft, pale and watery turnips that could be grown in that location.

“My barn is full of turnips, we can’t eat them fast enough! We’re oversupplied!” roared Paddy O’Donovan, the turnip mogul of Ballyhoomoloney, supported by cheers of agreement by lesser-influential farmers who also produced splendid turnips in smaller quantities.

“I’ve lost three donkeys trying to pull them around the Meander!” supplied Teddy Donnelly.

“We need a route through the forest!” cried Tommy Noonan, whilst he pointed directly at me, supposing, I think, that I might have relevant thoughts on that matter given my recent experience, and while I found it irksome that I was no longer the topic of conversation, I surely wasn’t getting into why I’d been to the other side of the forest and what business I may have had there.

“This confusion spell has got to stop!” cried Donny Dunphy, though what stake he had in the matter wasn’t clear but perhaps he just wanted to shout. He found a lot of people in agreement with him though, and I saw my moment to shine. I shuffled with unassuming grace to the centre of the barn where I stood with affected respect beside the council.

“Please, Mayor McGrath, if I might be permitted to speak on this matter?”

A silence fell over the committee and those assembled. I assume they were in admiration of my social mastery.

“Why, Ezzie!” Seán Óg simpered ingratiatingly, “We are so pleased, so *relieved* at your safe return!”

“That’s nice luv, shut up.”

“Em, yes, perhaps you could share a little about where you were?”

“No luv, shut up.”

Seán Óg, sensing his besting in the matter, was smart enough to relent, so I addressed those present. This was my greatest moment! And I’ve read Ayn Rand so I know what I’m doing here!

“Good evening friends! You know me as The Eminent Madame Esmerelda Zxeronna, Adept of The Tarot, yes?” not pausing for confirmation and ignoring the shuffling of feet, eye-rolling and impatience that befits a crowd being put in its place.

“I have a tremendous announcement to make. You are aware that the town has been under a powerful confusion spell for many millennia?”

“Yes!” they cried in unison, now warming to my message.

“And this has caused you great distress?”

“Yes!” they cried again.

“Well, I have news for you! You all know that I’ve been away in Dublin, where my life is now? Not an enforced exile as befits one who has notions, just my natural station, just the place that I can do my best work.”

The assembly watched silently.

“Well, I have a startling announcement. In the time I’ve been gone the world outside of Ballyhoomoloney has undergone great changes. Some of you will remember the Toba volcano?”

The assembly grumbled grudgingly, clearly not having enjoyed the Toba volcano any more than I did.

“That was when I first left you.”

I surveyed the floor for recognition but I had beguiled them and they couldn’t recall or express their sadness at their loss, so long ago that it was.

“I was forced to live a spartan life. I subsisted by the coast of Cavan with my...” I looked down to Billy Murphy who stared at me in stunned adoration, “*friend*, a great Chieftain. And before I left I knew I must protect you from the Toba volcano, lest all the Five Counties be eradicated in the global extinction event. Thus I cast over the land a powerful *protection* spell.”

The crowd gasped, and I thought it best not to leave them thinking too long.

“But there is a vile, hideous creature who lives in Cavan, a ‘Trianalaa Zerces’ who wanted you to suffer, but being entirely unable to cast her own spell, dolt that she is, she corrupted *my* protection spell to turn it into a *confusion* spell! Now the spell itself was sound, and it has allowed you all to survive extinction, not survive as much as *thrive*! Look at all you’ve accomplished in the time I’ve been away! Enoch, you’ve elevated the performing arts scene in Ballyhoomoloney to have *five* members, including yourself, that’s unprecedented!

“Tessa O’Donovan! Your daisies are featured in the Louvre museum in Donegal, you, Tessa, little Tessa, how far you’ve come!

“But the fetid Zerces has trapped you all in a bubble that has not just protected you (as I intended) but *isolated* you, destroying turnip exports, not to mention cabbage, causing distress and impoverishment!

“And I’ve lived on the outside! I’ve been beyond the boundary of the cursed confusion spell, for I *was* outside when I cast the protection spell, before it was corrupted! They have wonders out there that you can’t imagine. There’s a thing called a ‘millennial’! It’s a new breed of human. It has direct electronic connection with every other human in existence, and there’s *billions* of them. It has technology beyond your wildest dreams, magic people in plastic boxes that answer you when you ask the time, or how many millilitres are in a fluid ounce! They have magic pictures made of light that move and dance just inches from your eyes!”

The room was silent now, as I intended.

“My spell has protected you for thousands of years. Now though, you must decide whether you wish to remain in your isolation, for, if it is your wish, I will remove the spell and you will be catapulted into a world of wonder that will astonish you!”

“Do they still need turnips?” Charlie Doyle cried.

“Oh darling, they need turnips, and they need people to cook those turnips and to clean for them, and they’re stupid enough to let others think for them, and they’ll pay unconscionable prices for a fried egg with this green dust they call za’atar just sprinkled on it! They’re gullible beyond your wildest dreams! And they have this yoke called a bitcoin, which is the

most coveted, the most valuable and venerated currency you can imagine, and it weighs less than air! They'll give it to you for almost nothing, and they love the Tarot!"

"And we can't go there, because...?" I prompt on their behalf, "Because the fetid Zerces daemon made it so! But I can fix that!"

Expectant faces glared at me from all corners of the barn.

"In fact, I've *already* pickled her bacon! She's down a well, and she won't trouble you anymore!"

A sudden and violent cheer went up from the crowd which frightened me at first because the millennials, when they clap, they bang the backs of their hands like there's something wrong with them, but in Ballyhoomoloney, when a cheer is raised you'll hear it all the way down at Kelly's Bog, there is no doubt! My public believe in me, and these are my people! They worked (within the considerable limits of their capabilities) to rescue me in my time of need, and I must reciprocate. I'm not sure why. I think it's a sort of defect that Stephen has in his brain.

FIFTEEN

It was a bright spring morning and I was sitting out the east side of the house that overlooks Daddy's allotment beyond which the track leads down to Dunphy's piggery and then on to Ballymuckstones. Or, if you prefer, you can swing a right at the telephone exchange where Patty O'Byrne is like to be listening in to all the calls in the village in turn, but still finding time to keep tabs on everyone passing the window so that she can give them a superior scowl. It's then a ten minute walk to Slattery's Dangle and the old train station that was decommissioned around the time it was discovered that the train to Dublin was going out the north-west of Ballyhoomoloney and arriving at Ballykettle Cross then departing for Dublin again and arriving back at Slattery's Dangle where it started, and all because of the confusion spell! Inconvenient though it was, this is the spell that I'm now quite sure *I* cast, it was a long time ago and I was wont to be high back in those days, but it *did* succeed in protecting the town from the ravages of the Toba volcano, allowing the people of the Five Counties to live in peace these 75,000 years since. In that time they made all manner of cultural and agrarian advances. Billy Brophy had invented a big spiked wheel contraption that fits on the back of a tractor and plucks the ripe turnips out of the ground, simultaneously seeding a new crop as it goes, and Tessa O'Donovan, well we've already discussed her artistic accomplishments. The boys down Breeda Donnelly's bar have invented three new games to be played with bones, and Donny Dunphy has bred a new kind of pig by crossing it with a cat. Estralaada has been advancing the arts of crystal magic, and has made such a living out of it that she has completely decommissioned her outhouse in favour of indoor plumbing and subsists in the affluent district on the east side of Ballykettle Cross,

and I, while admittedly in exile, have both invented and perfected the glorious art of the Tarot.

Startled from my peaceful reverie, I heard the crunching of gravel underfoot, though with a timid cadence, not that of one purposefully striding to or from the outhouse with all entitlement to do so, but rather the tentative, faltering, intermittent scrunch of one up to no good. Being concealed from view around side the house I watched as Dr. Mulligan, cautious, like a gazelle, surveyed the front of the dwelling, Cormac Quinn following close on his heels with similar trepidation. Having satisfied themselves that they were alone, they silently agreed it was safe to proceed and moved with renewed apprehension toward the starboard side of the millennial motor vehicle which had sat in the driveway since my last aborted attempt to revive its operation. They maintained a distance of some feet as they peered through the tinted glass and could not contain a gasp of astonishment as they saw, within it, the clean lines of functional modern millennial design, the complex display of knobs, buttons, levers and other affordances which, while entertaining, are not required for its fundamental operation in its capacity as a propulsive contrivance. Millennials enjoy excess.

“Can I help you boys?” I announce assertively for the sheer pleasure of watching them jump out of their billowy woollen britches.

“AH! Azzie! Ezzie! We were looking for you!” Cormac Quinn barked haltingly as he regained his breath, then remembering that he had turned his back on the millennial motor vehicle, he spun back around sharply to make sure it had, in actuality, not demonically animated itself while he was enjoying his startlement.

“Well, you’ve found me now luv, haven’t you?” I enquire, offering an ingratiating smile, not so much to put him at ease, but enough to get him to the purpose of his visit so this interaction could be over with.

“Erm, we’ve come to talk to you about the spell Ezzie,” announced Dr. Mulligan, though, in reality, he had probably just run out of patients for the week, wont as he was to be the intervention prior to their immediate demise. Still, he was the best doctor in the village, though perhaps by virtue of being the *only* doctor in the village.

“On behalf of the Town Council!” added Cormac Quinn, now fully reinstalled in his faculties.

“We’re wondering if you had any time to look into the matter? I mean, have you made any progress in reversing the spell... either one?” enquired the good doctor.

“Well, *you* may have all the time in the world to be fluterin’ about with your gala dinners and taking long suspicious walks around the bog with Biddy Doyle,” I began.

“Biddy’s the town pharmacist!” Dr. Mulligan retorted defensively, “We have business!”

“But *I* have work to do here, there’s the allotment to tend, and Tessa O’Donovan is in her sickbed for want of her DNA Activation that I promised her last Thursday, and Benny the clairvoyant pig’s gone missing and we can’t find him, because usually when something goes missing around here we ask Benny the clairvoyant pig, and...”

“Yes, yes, of course Ezzie, I understand, however you are labouring under a misapprehension, for we only wanted to ask you to hold off on that for a while! You see the committee met and, well, we’re a little concerned about these *millennials* that lie on the other side of the confusion spell!” Dr. Mulligan explained.

“*Protection* spell!” Cormac Quinn corrected him, elbowing him in the ribs in retribution for his error, thus saving me the bother.

“You see Ezzie, we’re thinking about the more vulnerable members of society, like Charlie Doyle and Donny Dunphy, and the lads down at Breeda Donnelly’s bar, and the like. We’re concerned that magic moving pictures and za’atar, whatever that is, will give them *notions*,” the doctor explained, terminating his statement with a conspiratorially shocked gasp to emphasise what a problem this would be.

“What if they got hold of this TikTok lark you told us about and started dancing all around the shop like lunatics?”

“Well then they’d be dancing lunatics instead of just common or garden lunatics luv!” I explained, playing devil’s advocate to assist in exposition.

“Ezzie, you clearly have a wonderful life in exile, and you’re *able* for all this, but for us here in Ballyhoomoloney, it would be too much to ask,” Cormac Quinn pronounced solemnly, “and I’m sorry to say, the decision has been made.”

“Ezzie,” the learned doctor interjected quickly, understanding that I was not one to be told to not do something that I had a hankering to do, and wanting, sensibly, to intercept the crescendo of rage, with associated cursing that was looming, “you’re a very gifted healer... The Greatest Healer who Ever Lived,” both men nodded in emphasis, “and we need your help, but we humbly ask that you do it *our* way,” Dr. Mulligan pronounced obsequiously.

“Alright then,” I sighed, placated somewhat, “what do ye want?”

They brightened immediately, believing that they had crested their objective and successfully circumnavigated the dragons lurking in the unfriendly waters of Mme. Esmerelda Zxeronna challenged.

“We want turnip exports!” the doctor advised.

“Yes, many in the village feel that a resumption of commercial cooperation with Ballycumlonely would be mutually beneficial, beginning with turnips, but swiftly branching out into other commodities like cabbages and Lyons Green Label tea, eventually culminating in a full, fair and competitive trade agreement in all manner of commodities!” Cormac Quinn droned.

“They have a Krispy Kreme!” the doctor interjected.

Both men stopped and stared pleadingly at me.

“Would it be possible Ezzie? Could you just restore the Five Counties? We don’t need the rest!”

“We want to send turnips around Molly’s Meander without having to budget funerary expenses.”

“Or perhaps even the Muck Road could be reopened! That used to go to Ballymuckstones, then you could take the bypass ’round Ballykettle Cross and you’d come out behind Farley’s Yard and you’d be just down the hill from Main Street!” Cormac postulated.

“Didn’t Finnegan’s Finagle used to come out behind the dress shop?”

“Alright boys, alright!” I raised my hand condescendingly and cackled, “I’ll see what I can do!”

“Just the Five Counties now Ezzie, just restore our connection to the Five Counties, no letting the millennials in with their infernal technologies,” Cormac gestured hesitatingly at the millennial motor vehicle which was sitting innocently to his right, “perhaps one day... but for now we’re going to take it nice and slow!”

SIXTEEN

The sun was setting on another glorious day in Ballyhoomoloney. Tessa O'Donovan was up and about again after her DNA Activation, which was somewhat overdue, and Patty O'Byrne snootily relayed the message that she had achieved a movement and sampled her afternoon victuals, which was Patty's way of saying she'd gone to the outhouse and had a digestive biscuit with her tea. Daddy and I were still concerned for Benny the pig, but he had gone missing before and though Dunphey's Butchers on Varadkar Street had run a special on pork and bacon the next day, which did raise our suspicions, it all came to nought for he was found sniffing for truffles on the eastern periphery of the Enchanted Forest the next day, having had, unlike me, the good sense and absence of cause to venture in. Daddy, Doralada, Philladora and me had a nice mutton stew with creamy mashed turnips and stone cakes with nettle jam for dessert and I was now feeling the urge to retire.

I closed the door to my boudoir only to be greeted with a tremendous "Oink!" and found Benny the clairvoyant pig rising from his slumber on my bed, the sheets all tossed about the place and a lone truffle on the pillow.

"Daddy!" I cried, "Benny's back!" I opened the door again to shoo him out and began tidying the bed. It was then that I found the paper. I almost missed it, scrunched as it was in the bedclothes which Benny had rendered asunder, but I knew the feel of the paper for I only use the highest quality of velum in my spell book. I pulled at the edges and found it dry and pliant and fully legible with only a small water stain on the bottom corner.

‘Spell for the Concealment of Secret Locations’ it read.

This was the page that had been missing from my spell book! This was the confusion spell! “Oh Benny you beautiful creature!” I cried as he skittered off the bed and onto the floor where I grasped him by either side of his pink head and kissed him square on the snout.

“Oink! Oink!” he replied, his trotters clacking on the ground as he beat a retreat to his sty.

Benny had saved the day, however did he know? Where did he find it? Why didn’t he eat it? These were mysteries I couldn’t dwell on now.

Reading the spell, I could discern it was a relatively mundane enchantment that causes a cloud of confusion to befall any person who knowingly seeks the location upon which the adept practitioner has cast it. Now that explains a lot! The entire reason I could penetrate the spell while racing about in the millennial motor vehicle was because I was heroically fleeing the clutches of the local constabulary who had constructive criticism to offer upon the manner of my operation of the motor vehicle, thus providing a brief respite from my knowing pursuit of the Big Red Barn, and so I stumbled upon a portal through the spell to Ballyhoomoloney, which I *wasn’t* seeking!

But how did the spell become so corrupted as to fracture the whole Five Counties asunder?

“The medicine!” That must be it! As I fled the Toba volcano I must have grabbed this spell, wrenching it straight from the book in my haste to escape, having the full intention to use it to protect the Five Counties from destruction, but while I was making away I was discombobulated and upon my excursion into the corporeal apparatus of The Lady of the Hill I must have inadvertently forgotten the page, thus, upon casting the spell I didn’t have my written reference, and later, when I cast the spell again at the Big Red Barn I was under the influence of the fetid Zerces medicine and the two spells must have produced an interference pattern that caused the original protection spell to partition the land into isolated shards. Most as like the only reason anyone ever managed to get around Molly’s Meander alive is because they stopped seeking Ballycumlonely and were

fully focused on not falling to their death, which many of them did anyway! That cursed Zerces monster! I knew it was all her fault!

Now, however, in possession of the original spell, all that damage could be undone! Having the page on which it was written, I needed only to cast a neutralising spell upon the artefact and within minutes the glory of the Five Counties would be restored, then I could re-cast the original spell over the entire land, and so long as they didn't repair the train line to Dublin and subsequently forget their reason for boarding the train, then the Five Counties would remain protected and Ballyhoomoloney could resume its rightful role of providing the best turnips to all the other counties, and pretty solid cabbages too!

* * *

I bid farewell to Daddy, Doralada, Philladora and Benny the clairvoyant pig and my bags were packed into the millennial motor vehicle again.

"Are you going to say goodbye to Billy?" Daddy asks, rather insensitively as I was planning to escape without having to deal with that problem.

"Billy will understand, Daddy," I assure him. Remember the average millennial only lives a couple of hundred years! And once Jamesie is gone I'll probably retire to Ballyhoomoloney and continue my life's purpose by means of distance healing, for by then I fully expect you'll have the Net Curtains."

"The what now?" Doralada enquires.

"It's complicated, Doralada," I assure her, "but the millennials have a worldwide communications network called the Net Curtains, it's where they keep their moving pictures and the sum total of their knowledge."

"And we're going to have this?" Philladora asks with a hint of disdain, "What will Patty O'Byrne do for work then?"

I bid them all farewell, and, having filled the millennial motor vehicle with red medicine this time, it reluctantly spluttered into life and I took my place on the plush fabric pilot's throne.

Daddy, I can see, is a little emotional, and Philladora and Doralada are waving a tad mournfully, but I have to go back to my work with the millennials, for it is an onerous responsibility being The Greatest Healer who Ever Lived, and that work is not complete just yet. I also miss my Tarot deck collection, the rank, humid air of Dublin, and making eggs with za'atar and sriracha for my millennial consort Jamesie who would, by now, be quite worried about me.

I coax the motor vehicle around in a wide circle so it points back the way I came, down the Muck Road, which should by now be open all the way to the border of the Five Counties. Suddenly I catch sight of a small black-clad figure running at prodigious speed up from the direction of Dunphy's field and I hear Billy's deep booming voice, the one he uses to convey mortal panic, bellowing hectically, "No, Ezzie, don't leave me! Please Ezzie, I love you! Ezzie I'll die if you leave me!"

It was now that I fortuitously recalled that one of the affordances of the motor vehicle, that was quite useful in practical terms, was the ratio knob at my left knee which I had seen Stephen use many times. Whereas I had positioned it at '1' for launch, I now grasped it firmly and yanked it down in the direction of '2' which means 'twice as fast'. There was a cacophony of crunching and a concerning smell of burning from the daemon in the engine who did not like being commanded to work harder, but, right enough, the conveyance did promptly gather speed and Billy couldn't catch me now!

Go Zxeronna!

SEVENTEEN

“Oh, you’re back,” the millennial whinnied.

‘Bleep-bleep-bloop’, added the Steam Deck.

“Whaaaat?”

“We’re out of za’atar again, and the shower cubicle needs cleaning!”

“You ungrateful little wretch! Here am I gallivanting all about the counties to neutralise the evil influences of the fetid Zerces upon you, risking life and limb, and leaving all my clients in Dublin without service for the month and all you have to say is ‘Oh, you’re back’?”

The light from the kitchen window reflected off the millennial and I had to shield my eyes. “What are you wearing?” I ask impatiently.

The millennial looks at me doltishly for a moment before explaining, “It’s my new snoodie, the one you said would protect me from the evil travelling on the 4G!”

“And you’re still wearing it?”

“Of course Ezzie, you told me I had to, you told me it would keep me safe while you were away!”

A tear escaped my eye and I remembered why I had so much affection for this pitiable creature. It trusted me! How wonderful it was to be trusted! And how potentially profitable!

“Well, Jamesie, you can take it off now, I’ve dealt with the source of the evil and it should trouble you no longer.”

“Do you know why Madame Trianalaa doesn’t visit me anymore?” the millennial inquired with a hint of sorrow in its voice.

“I’m quite sure she’s just abandoned you Jamesie! Like I said, she’s an evil, fickle auld bitch! By the way, Jamesie, did you make any more bitcoins while I was gone?”

It was then that I remembered that I had my bag. How I’d forgotten this I don’t know, as I *always* bring my bag. I opened it now and rummaged to the bottom, under the hallucinogenic moss I had gathered in the Enchanted Forest, to retrieve a priapic blue mushroom from its robustly scented depths.

“Never mind that Jamesie. I’ve brought you a gift.” I proffer the blue mushroom and the millennial hesitates. “Wait, I’ll put some sumac on it, we have some of that don’t we?”

“Actually I’d rather a turmeric latte,” it chirps happily.

“Of course you would Jamesie, of course you would! I’ve no idea what that is, but I’ll go look for one!”

“No! Wait! Don’t leave again! You’re just back and... I missed you!”

“You did?”

The millennial looked abashed and lowered his Steam Deck, which in itself was a remarkable development.

I put my arms around him, causing a flurry of rustling from his metallic snoodie, and reassured him gently, “No, Jamesie. You keep making the bitcoins, and I’ll be your Medicines Specialist as long as you live!”

There was a moment’s silence before he asked, rather analytically, “How long will that be?”

A millennial after my own heart!

“As long as you keep making the bitcoins Jamesie.”

Go Zxeronna!

Born into relative poverty 83,597½ years ago in the small Irish village of Ballyhoomoloney on the border of Kerry and Leitrim, Mme. Esmerelda Zxeronna Johnson Lee Lewis III began her industrious life as a farmer's daughter in the rich and vibrant cultural landscape of the prior emanation of humankind. When her remaining family were wiped out by the eruption of the Toba volcano 75,000 years past, the industrious Ezzie, having much to give to the world, sought refuge in the corporeal apparatus of one of the few survivors, the wife of a great nobleman, and survived for millennia thereafter disseminating her healing wisdom throughout human history.



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