

## In Through the Ears

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Triskelion swirls of neolithic fog, carved freehand into the living wood. Three interwoven spirals, balance in opposition. Set to stone thousands of years ago at Éireann's ancient passage tomb. To re-emerge long after on Sicilian and Manx in a cartoonish wheel of human legs.

But all you see is *Starry Night*.

You'd been out jogging, and when you stopped to take a breather against the tree you noticed it. Carved into the branch's bark. By a faerie queen, perhaps? The thought makes you smile. Out branding sacred oaks to advertise a coming ceremony. A summons and a signpost that will lead curious hearts to the grove, where a network of loosely confederated animal-hybrid fae-types will shepherd the stirring hypnogogs toward an awakening to the invisible world that has been hiding under their noses all along. Then they'll dance by light of a full moon until the toxins sweat off into flower cups and the leafy midrib folds of undergrowth. Later, these will be gathered carefully and poured over dying embers in the first frosty dawn of a new age.

Laugh at these notions. They distract you from a terrifying reality laying siege to your conscious mind. You don't know where you. You don't know what came before, just moments ago. What little light filters through the branches indicates sunset. And these are deep woods with thick and heavy understory. But the last thing you recall is jogging through the park after morning therapy. Ages ago. Far away. Did you zone out and get lost? It would not be the first time. What does your therapist say? Deep breaths until you find the place in your body where anxiety originates.

You hear a voice cry out: *Someone's coming!*

A voice in your head, though, probably. Urgent, like a warning or promise. Or... like an invitation? The worship, the dance. Your laughter echoes off the leaves. Alone in the woods. No clue how. Breathing in and out. Not to worry. An entire city surrounds you. Still, streets will trickle to forest at some point. Like out where Emma went off the road. Asleep at the wheel. Rolled her car. Unconscious when she died, they say. You hope for a visit every night. But she never comes, and by now you've decided that wherever she is (which is *nowhere!* She is dead is where she is), it's certainly not the dreamworld. Anyway. Still. Shouldn't have died. Should absolutely not be dead. Not by any statistical reckoning. Not in any sensible world.

Wasn't driving fast. Drifted off the road, came to a gradual stop. Sustained no injuries other than the bonk on the head that knocked her out. Barely enough slope to roll the car. Upside down so gravity could choke her to death with her own seatbelt. If she hadn't buckled up, she'd still be alive. Or even if she'd been going a bit faster. Crashed into a tree. Then maybe

she  
would  
still  
be  
alive.

Your scream is a high-pitched rattling *fuck*, or *faaaaaargh* or something starting with an *f*, and then on and on, mixing into reflections off the leaves until your air runs raw and you've curled into a spiral on the ground, tasting your own tears.

*Someone's coming.*

The thought connects to a sound. A crunch of footsteps... or echo of. So faint.

Perhaps you're only losing your mind. Undiagnosed brain tumour or some creeping degenerative illness. That might be better than an unreliable timeline. Skipping ahead for no reason. Or back... Way back. Your fingertip traces the triskelion. Centre wave to outer rings, flowing right on down the drain toward the point of reversal and back again. How long have you been...? Is this your life now? No clue where you came from or what brought you here or where here even is... Nor, if you are honest, have you ever been able to recall a single incident in its full extent from beginning to end. All episodic. No continuity, this life of yours. No start, no finish, no transition from what came before. Just a head jam packed with the middles of things. Perhaps this moment, too, will fade from as you overcome consciousness through slow, deep breathing, peeling you out of the world and into your body. Dissolving into the sensation of pulse, the flow of suspicion. How long will it take, you wonder, swirling along the carved trenches where tiny slivers of bark flake away? Kneeling now. Fingers on the tree. Swirling the carved trenches into tiny flaking slivers of bark. Did you do this? How long until this mindless tracing becomes the only reality you've ever known? Until it dawns on you that you are in fact and have always been that very queen. Dispatcher of emissaries. Constructing your labyrinths from tree to tree—summoning the lost and confused, the abandoned and mislaid, the runaways and the cursed and the sleepwalkers, the amnesiacs and the dreamers and those whose anchors have flown away. Bring them. Beckon them here. Draw them into your arms. *Someone is coming.* Footsteps grow near. Soon they will kneel before you, trembling in your firefly mists and those delicate silver flowers who grow and bloom and wither in a breath. Someone is

coming. How long until the signal? Until they leap and dance in triskelion swirls, crushing the meadow with bare toes, ducking low branches and kicking up splashes of dew... on and on and on and on... in a pattern begin ages gone by... passed down through generation from mother to child, from lover to lover, from child to stone... tracing these footpaths, rolling back the years breath by breath until the rehearsal is indistinguishable from the performance, spun and renewed, charmed and awakened, dressed in fresh infancy and crystal skin, cuddled over by open hearts, warm eyes, contented exhaustion until each memory leaps off the cliff's edge of their tongues, egged on by a melody drawn in through the ears. And how long until they're startled awake by the car bouncing and rolling and slamming against the side of the planet or from flight through woods too sparse and civilized for anyone to possibly get lost. Not on their own. Not without your guidance and spells. Sleep little baby all is well.



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Somebody is coming. Breathe deep, and allow the feeling to enfold you. Let the grasses and the wildflowers grow high above you, until your pieces have diminished enough for insects to ferry low. Down, down, along highways of root. Down into murky municipalities you are parcelled and carted and fed nibble by nibble into grubbling mouths. Do not fear the winding way. You will rise again. In one thousand years, when the world is ready for luminosity, for starting over. When the queen of the wood forgets her silly dreams—and in forgetting, recalls herself as dancer and inducer and metanoist and resurrectionist?

Not so long, it seems. A soft shuffle disturbs the bracken beneath your feet. Soon your incipient arrival will deposit you there beside the tree. Someone has come. A shattered thing. What's that? You don't remember the path you took to get here? A tumble, a roll, some spiralling lights? Hush now. Fear not what you can never recall... Sit beside me under the star jammed night. Inhale the expanse. Retrace your footsteps. Feel into your body. Exhale your form. Offer up dreams, and rest a while.