

## Strange Seasons of the Wellspring

*By Pete Planisek*

### Autumn

A fitful wind, not yet possessed of the lingering cold to come, murmured around Arabella's exposed face and she unconsciously drew her cloak closer. The bucket she carried rhythmically kept time with each of her steps as it brushed against her outer layer of clothing, which in turn whisked across the color-laden ground. The daylight seemed oddly muted through the shifting array of leaves that remained on the trees. Although she was aware of these autumn delights, her thoughts remained singular, transfixed on reaching one location—the well. Would he be there on time? The very thought of seeing her childhood friend caused her to quicken her pace as she ambled up the small rise to her destination.

The well itself was partially hidden by surrounding stocks of trees, many of which had by now cast down their canopies in anticipation of winter's rest. It was an isolated enough to keep prying eyes at bay but not so concealed as to make it scandalous to be alone there. As she wound up the last sunken-stone steps of the rise the air began to carry a tune. Was he playing for her? Arabella smiled at the thought, eager to meet his embrace, anticipation growing within her.

How disappointing the scene that met her gaze.

An old woman was perched near the ancient well. Gargoyle-like she hovered between the well itself and aside a large pot bubbling with a foul-smelling, writhing substance. She hummed contently to herself, seemingly unaware of Arabella's presence, as she continued to play a worn fiddle. Arabella hesitated. Should she leave before she was noticed? The great

house was not far beyond this place. What if he came after she'd gone? What if he'd already been here and left?

"It's rude to go sneaking up behind an old woman," a voice sternly declared.

As she refocused her thoughts, Arabella studied the speaker. She was kin to contradiction. Short but somehow imposing, horribly wrinkled and stooped yet seemingly ageless, wearing clothes that were simple and tattered but possessing an air of regality. Somewhere behind her eyes was a hidden gaze, one that made Arabella wither inside, as if every thought she'd ever have or would fashion into existence lie bare before them.

"I thought ...," she began before the other interrupted.

"You thought I was someone else? From the great house, perhaps?" the shrunken woman chided.

"I've simply come to the well for water," Arabella countered after a moment's pause.

"Water, water everywhere and nary a drop to drink," the woman laughed to the girl's consternation. "Oh come now, come. A girl such as you would not travel all this way to this ancient well just for water."

"I've never seen you here before. How would you know?" Arabella challenged.

A look of satisfaction greeted the observation and the older woman set down her fiddle.

"My well is fallow but this wellspring still offers a pure source. If indeed you have come for water, I will help you," she offered gesturing at the girl's forgotten bucket. The wizened figure approached her. Arabella took an involuntary step backward.

“Oh, that won’t be necessary Miss...?”

The woman reached out and took Arabella’s hand into her cold, calloused one.

“My name is of an old tongue, one now lost to these lands. You may address me as Mother.”

A gust of wind sent a myriad of colors dancing downward from the sky. Suddenly Arabella did indeed feel a chill in the air.

“Borrowed time,” Mother noted as she gazed at the tumbling leaves, “nothing more than borrowed time.”

The pervasive sadness in her tone softened Arabella a measure as did a burgeoning curiosity about this singular character.

“Do you come to this well often?”

“Ever since I was a child,” the younger woman replied.

“A lonely walk,” Mother asserted.

“Not so lonely,” Arabella countered as they approached the familiar well. “If not for this well, I might never have met my best friend.”

“From the great house?” Mother asked. “These are knowing waters,” she said by way of explanation to Arabella’s puzzled expression. She released the girl’s hand upon reaching the well.

Though released, a lingering unseen presence continued to pressure the younger woman's hand as she began to turn the crank to raise the well's bucket.

"It's stuck on something," she reasoned after several failed attempts. She glanced down the well but the murkiness below offered no solutions.

"It was working fine before," Mother nonchalantly noted as she sat down on a rock near her boiling pot and began to unwrap an apple from a basket she'd brought. "Maybe your friend will kindly help when he arrives."

Arabella was breathing hard and loosened her hood before seating herself near the old woman.

"What are you making," the girl tentatively asked as she momentarily studied the contents of the pot. How had she transported such a heavy pot to this remote location by herself?

"Soap," Mother grunted as she offered her companion a slice of apple. "You use soap, yes?"

Arabella nodded as she awkwardly consumed the apple. She wanted to leave, but in truth, she would need water later and was still uncertain of her friend's whereabouts.

"What do you know about this well?" the old woman demanded as Arabella consumed a second apple slice.

Caught off guard by the tone of the question the girl initially choked a bit on her food before hastily swallowing the remainder.

"It's old ...," she began.

“As am I. You can tell me nothing more?”

It was a well. What more was there to say?

Arabella shrugged, attempting to conceal her annoyance.

“As long as the water is clean I guess there isn’t much to say about it?”

“I thought you said you grew up here,” Mother leaned closer, her eyes narrowing a degree.

Arabella met her gaze. The old woman clicked her tongue.

“While we wait I shall tell you of this well.”

“That really isn’t necessary ...,” Arabella’s words were stifled by both the renewed pressure on her hand and the alarming earnestness in the old woman’s spectral eyes. The girl could only listen.

## **Winter**

He’d become a hunter this night. An unwilling participant swept along by events too terrible to fully comprehend at such a late hour. Things like this didn’t happen here. The clergyman’s legs moved stiffly as he marched through the uneven tracks left by his prey in the thick, mostly undisturbed snow. Although he’d only been in the town a few years he knew where these tracks were leading. She’d gone to the old well.

His feet shifted suddenly on an unseen icy patch and he froze, fighting to remain upright. As he steadied himself, the bible he carried pitched into the snow. His breath rose in foggy wisps all around him but he made no effort to regain the fallen tome. For hours now he’d been

playing the part he was supposed to play—comforting, praying, offering soothing platitudes, listening but not really allowing himself to feel what all of this meant. There was honor in his actions but the horror of it all, of what awaited, of services left to be performed was overwhelming. How could he continue to play this dispassionate role when he was so angry after all the needless suffering he'd seen today?

The town was very unaccepting of outsiders so he'd never truly felt at home here. In fact, with a few exceptions, he'd seen the same faces and been invited to the same homes over and over again. The numbers of faithful in the rows of the church never varied. Those who approached him always came for the same basic problems. In short, nothing in his life had prepared him for these dark hours. Now when people needed him most, he was inadequate.

He took a moment to straighten his askew spectacles.

“Dammit all,” he remarked as he retrieved the holy book, brushing the snow off the leather cover.

He thrust both the book and his shivering hands in his pockets as he regarded the landscape. Why the hell?

It was Emily's sister who'd sent him on this mission of mercy. He didn't have the heart to inform her when she called that he'd just returned from comforting several of the victims' families. He did not know Emily Vanmeter or her family, aside from her sister, who'd been unable to locate her via friends. The old great house that Emily lived in was not nearly as isolated as it had once been but Emily's sister, who'd moved away from the town several years ago, did not have any of the neighbor's numbers. She'd spoken to the police after her sister's release from questioning and attempted in vain to reach her on the phone.

Unable to secure a flight she'd resolved to drive back to her former hometown. Along the way, the idea to have him check on Emily had occurred to her. Inwardly reluctant, he'd agreed with Emily's sister that she probably would not react well to the police looking in on her and he could think of no one locally to send. They were all far too busy with their own sorrows. No one had appeared to his repeated summons at the door upon his arrival at the old house. Unwilling to give up, he'd ventured into the snow to see if he might gain insight through a window and discovered the retreating boot prints from one of the back doors. The doors were locked, which afforded him one last choice to locate Emily.

The clergyman resumed his journey to the secluded well.

When he reached his destination a lone lantern illuminated the figure by the circular arrangement of stones. The woman's left hand rested upon one of the well's old wooden supports for the roof and bucket crank. Her back was to him. She was staring intently down into the well.

"You'd think I would fear this place. I saw a ghost here once," Emily Vanmeter announced without preamble. Her eyes did not rise from the well. "An old woman. I often wondered if she drowned here."

"Mrs. Vanmeter?"

"I know my sister saw her too but she was frightened of her. She never comes down here. But me ... I used to bring my son down here for picnics. This was our place. He was so small I had to pick him up so he could look down the well. I wonder if he ever saw her. Are you down there?"

“Mrs. Vanmeter, your sister asked that I check on you. I’m ....”

She shook her head. It didn’t matter to her who he was.

“He used to laugh. It made me laugh. A mother is supposed to protect her child. I could tell something wasn’t right with him but he was mine. You love; you’re supposed to be loved back. That’s family. That was family.”

“Mrs. Vanmeter, I know you’re in pain. I’ve been talking to a lot of families tonight in pain. Families in grief because of what your son did,” the clergyman pointedly asserted. “Hiding down here at this well won’t change what’s happened. Let us return to the house. Your sister is on her way.”

Emily turned her head a measure.

“Go away.”

The clergyman pursed his lips.

“That would not be wise, Mrs. Vanmeter.”

“You all leave. My husband, my sister, my friends ... my son. And then it all goes wrong and I get blamed when they’re the ones who left. I didn’t raise a monster.”

She swayed, steadying herself against the well. The clergyman stepped closer.

“Let’s go back.”

“I said go away,” she viciously demanded. “I don’t want to hear any more talk of the innocent. Do you know what I did before he was born? I made jewelry—rings, necklaces,



earrings. I gave it up when I had a family. I gave everything up to watch him because I knew he wasn't right. They want my blood. I didn't do anything wrong."

"The courts will decide ..."

"I've disowned him," she vowed. "He's no longer mine. When he chose to ... all those people. How can I live with that? A mother protects her children. And mine ...."

Her right hand rose to clasp her forehead. This was his chance. The clergyman stepped forward and put a comforting arm around her and in that moment he found himself unable to stop himself from asking the one question that had plagued his thoughts all night.

"Dear God, Emily. Why did you ever buy him that gun?" he demanded.

"So many innocent," she breathed. That's when he noticed the trickle of blood on her forehead but he could detect no wound there.

A sickening smile spread across Emily's narrow face.

"You feared I'd jump but I'm already in the well. I've disowned him but I couldn't get the ring with his birthstone off."

The clergyman's horrified eyes followed Emily's to the sight of the knife, which lay atop the well's edge and the trail of blood that ran through the pure white snow to the missing ring finger on her right hand.

## **Spring**

Pauline drew back the paintbrush and considered the progress of her work.

“Perhaps, a touch more of the Prussian blue,” she decided and began to mix a portion on her palate.

Her hand shook a little as she worked her brush back and forth but the arthritis was tolerable today. She lifted her head upward so her straw gardening hat was no longer blocking the sun. Her thoughts returned to a trip she’d once taken to Italy. The world had seemed so green and alive, just as it was today. The vernal season had all but erased the long, dark winter and Pauline’s surrounding echoed color, sound, and life. Her senses bathed in the gentle breezes of May.

“There you are,” a familiar voice exclaimed.

“I should have expected you’d be the one to find me,” Pauline smiled as she lowered her head and met her granddaughter’s gaze.

“Mom said you didn’t come down here anymore. I’ve been looking everywhere for you,” Josette said, throwing her arms outward for emphasis.

“You’re young. Besides, with all the sports you’ve played running around looking for an old lady must have been easy,” she winked and indicated a nearby spot where the young woman could sit down.

After settling, Josette considered her grandmother’s work. It didn’t look much like the old well that stood before them. Of all Pauline’s grandchildren, Josette had always been her favorite, in part because she was always more thoughtful than the other children. Her presence was soothing and reassuring. They sat together in quiet reflection for a time and brush stroke by

brush stroke, the well, as envisioned by Pauline's imagination, began to emerge from the chaos of color.

"When's that wedding of yours again?" Pauline casually asked.

"Next October," Josette mumbled over the arms crossed and perched upon her drawn up knees. "Have to finish college first, you know mom and dad."

"Well, weddings take time. A lot of time," Pauline added as she twirled her brush sharply downward on the canvas. "I think some people make them so complicated just to give themselves something to do."

Josette giggled and Pauline grinned to herself.

"We can't all just up and get married in Scottish castles grandma," the girl said.

"There was a war on at the time," Pauline reminded her as she cleaned a brush. "It was the castle or the barracks before your grandfather shipped out. He was so dashing in that uniform of his."

"It never scared you to get married so quickly after meeting him?"

Pauline halted her motions and looked directly at her granddaughter.

"Sometimes you just know you're making the right decision. I've missed having you around these past few summers," Josette's grandmother admitted.

Josette's eyes momentarily faltered before she reached out for Pauline's hand.

"I'm sorry. College has kept me so busy and I'm almost never home."

“I know,” she patted the girl’s hand reassuringly. “I just missed you.”

“They’ve probably taken him to the nursing home by now,” Josette observed. “Mom wanted to know if you wanted me to drive you over.”

Pauline let go of her grandchild’s hand.

“Tomorrow maybe,” she said uncertainly.

She should feel more guilty about not wanting to accompany her husband to the nursing home but after so many endless months of caring for him, she needed today. Josette seemed to understand and again a pleasant quiet, filled only by wind and birdsong, grew between them.

Josette’s long, auburn hair flitted in the breezes, just as it had when long ago she’d sat here as a child and watched her grandmother paint.

“Do you still paint?” Pauline finally inquired.

“Not much,” Josette admitted. “Before grandpa got sick he was trying to help me with painting water.”

“Hmm, it can be a challenge. He always did like his seascapes. The nice thing about wells is that you don’t have to worry about it much,” her grandmother noted as she lightly tapped the brush free of any remaining moisture before dipping the brush back to the colorful dabs on the palette.

“Does this well still have water in it?”

“Ah, yes. Less than there used to be when we first moved in here. This entire area was overgrown. If we hadn’t found those original landscaping plans in the great house’s study, I

doubt we'd ever have known this was even here," Pauline surmised. "Strange how things work out."

"I bet it looks pretty down here in October," Josette posited.

"It has its charms," her grandmother agreed. "Castles are good too."

"I wish I could get married by the well you're painting."

"Maybe you can. Was it Spain or Turkey? I'll have to look at our vacation pictures. Anyway somewhere in our travels we came across this elaborate well that was several stories tall and it had this partially enclosed staircase that wound around the well all the way down to the bottom. These columns framed everything like windows and then they'd created a beautiful tile mosaic on the floor where you actually accessed the water," Pauline explained. "Quite a sight, yes, quite a sight."

Unexpectedly, she suddenly welled up with tears. Josette hugged her grandmother.

"God. Forty two years together. You think you're ready," Pauline lamented. "I don't even know how I'm going to fall asleep without him next to me."

Josette only held the old woman closer.

Pauline knew today was the end of her life as it had been. They'd move her out too. Maybe to a smaller home or apartment, perhaps shuffling between the homes of relatives, or they'd just tuck her away in a nursing home as well.

She collected herself.

"I think I'm done painting for today," she told Josette.

“We all still love you, grandma,” her granddaughter affectionately said.

“Then help a lady out. Let’s get this stuff back to the house. We can at least get dinner started before everyone gets back.”

As Josette began to clean and pack up her grandmother’s paint materials, the old woman wandered over to the well. Unnoticed by her granddaughter, she retrieved an envelope from the back pocket of her jeans. She’d read the contents in private before she’d come down to the well to paint. The medical test results contained within informed her that it was unlikely she would live past the end of the year. Pauline unceremoniously cast the envelope into the well, straightened her wide-brimmed straw hat, and helped Josette finish repacking the painting supplies.

They set off down the well-trodden path for the great house at a slow pace.

“I hope October will be this lovely.”

Her granddaughter nodded in silent agreement.

“Just so you know, I always cry at weddings.”

## **Summer**

Gavyn was nervous. The restoration work on the great house would be completed in the next few days, after that, God only knew if he’d ever get a chance to ask her out.

“Gavyn, get this line back out to the truck,” Mr. Piper ordered. “And while you’re out there get a bigger box for that outlet in the front hallway. Hey, did you hear me?”

“Bigger box. Got it,” Gavyn nodded to the master electrician as he finished tightening down a panel screw.

Mr. Piper silently studied his apprentice. The young man had been quite preoccupied the past several days and though he tried, as a lot of young men did, to conceal the reason for his absent mindedness, it was clear what the distraction was. He paused to wipe the sweat from his brow. With no electricity in the house, there was no relief to be found from the oppressive summer humidity. Piper had faith that Gavyn had all the makings of a solid electrician but in his current state he was only slowing down the work. At least the day was almost done.

“Hey, hey, hey. Take the line,” he reminded Gavyn who’d begun to walk away.

He returned a short time later.

“We’ll have to run to the store to get another bigger box,” he announced.

Mr. Piper sat up and considered the situation as he consulted his watch.

“Suppose we might as well wrap it up for the day then. Looks like the cleaning staff has the same idea,” he noted as several of the maids passed by the doorway hauling a variety of cleaning implements.

Gavyn watched them with rapt attention but he did not see her. She must be walking again today. His eyes darted toward the back of the house. Mr. Piper smiled to himself.

“I’ll finish cleaning up,” he told his young assistant as he shooed him away.

“Thanks,” Gavyn grinned and without another word, he practically ran to the back door.

His heart rejoiced upon seeing the young maid walking through the field. The dark clouds portended rain but she seemed to be in no hurry as her form retreated from the house. Gavyn had the presence of mind to snatch one of the folded painter's tarps that were stacked by the door before following after her.

"Katura," he called as he drew near her. "Katura, wait up. Hey, it's me, Gavyn, the klutzy guy you helped the other day. Can I walk with you? My home's over on that side of town."

As her surprise faded, Katura considered his request and finally nodded in agreement. They walked in awkward silence for a few moments. Gavyn noticed her limp seemed more pronounced over the open ground than it had in the house.

"How is youurr, youurrr hand?" she stuttered in a thick, Germanic sounding accent. Her grey eyes tracked to his. He blinked as if coming out of a daze as he stared back at her.

"Ah, good. Good. Thank you again," he said; a bit embarrassed by the memory of how they'd met two days ago. He raised his bandaged hand as evidence of how good he was. "Good as new."

She found his nervousness endearing as he looked away, visibly pondering what to say next. He'd actually caused the injury unintentionally when he'd spotted her cleaning the staircase spindles and become distracted. He was a little younger than she was but she couldn't help but notice these last several days that Gavyn was infatuated with her. It was nice to be noticed but troubling at the same time. Already deeply conflicted about her life, this type of attention could only make her decision more difficult than it was.

Still she could not deny a certain ironic attraction to the young electrician.



The heavens opened without warning. A steady, warm, harmless rain began to fall. They paused as Gavyn attempted to unfurl the musty tarp. As he raised it over their heads, streams of white paint began to fall on them. Apparently the painters didn't care if the tarp was dry when they'd concluded their work for the day.

“Ah,” Katura squawked as paint coated them.

Gavyn abandoned the tarp, looked around, grabbed her hand and guided them to the old well that was nearby. There, under the overhang of the fraying cedar roof, they collected themselves. Gavyn was furious with himself. He'd ruined everything. But Katura was laughing and soon so was he.

Already drenched they began to dance among the torrent of droplets. Katura's dark, brunette mane, which she kept in a bun, unfurled. She freed the remaining strands, shaking a spray of water outward. Home could never be like this. Her heart raced, recalling all of the stolen glances between them the past several days. Lost in the moment and embracing the joy of such an unfamiliar freedom she grabbed Gavyn's face and passionately kissed him. Her damp fingers caressed the back of his neck. For an eternal moment, joy existed between them.

Katura suddenly drew away in embarrassment and confusion. Still surprised by her impulsive advance, Gavyn stood still in the pouring rain as she retreated to the well, uncertain if he should follow her, if she would flee, or if she'd return.

“We didn't do anything wrong,” he finally softly said.

She kept her back to him. It was obvious she was crying. Still worried how she would react he kept his distance. The persistent rain showed no sign of dissipating. Gavyn's eyes

roved over the landscape and spying some wild berries he occupied himself by picking some, filling a makeshift catch with this soaking shirt, careful not to allow any of the paint on the shirt to touch them.

After completing his task, he was pleased to see she'd remained.

"I found some berries," he announced as he approached the overhang of the well.

Katura wiped her face before turning. Gavyn dumped the lot onto one of the well's stones and they ate in silence.

"They're good," Katura at last said, "Ttthhankkk you."

Gavyn smiled.

"The fields by my house have tons of these bushes. My sister and I harvest them every year."

"Did you grow up on a farm?" she asked with marked interest.

"We have land around us, not a proper farm but we grow things, yeah. You?"

The question seemed to trouble her greatly.

"You're not from around here, are you?"

"Nnnnooooo, no, very far from here. I'm just here to wwwork," she replied.

Gavyn noticed pronounced calluses on her hands.

"Staying long?" he inquired.

She drew in a long breath.

“I don’t know.”

Katura’s pleading eyes looked up to his. Something was troubling her deeply, much more than the impromptu kiss they’d shared. He could see that behind her eyes a struggle was being fought.

“I think you’re very kind,” he said without really knowing why.

Some of tension faded from her features.

“Nobody’s ever kissed me like that,” he admitted.

She looked down for a moment.

“I tttthhiink you’re kind ttttoo,” she confessed, much to Gavyn’s delight and Katura did not recoil when he gently took her hand to hold.

Her lopsided smile was endearing, as was her delicate shyness. Looking at Katura now Gavyn realized he wanted to know everything about her. The rain began to abate.

“More than anywwhherre I’ve been this place reminds mmmeeee of home. The fields and the sunset. I haaavvven’t been home in a long time.”

Something in her tone made Gavyn realize this was a difficult admission for her. One she did not share lightly. She closed her eyes before speaking again.

“I’m Amish.”

Gavyn search his memory. He’d heard of the Amish but knew very little about them.

“I didn’t think we had any Amish around here,” he stammered. “Don’t you have a bunch of rules to follow like how you dress? You’re not dressed Amish.”

Katura touched his hair.

“Our way can be vvvverry strict. I’m going through *rumschpringa*. We leave ourrrr homes and experience the English world. But we mussssst decide which world is for ussssss. So I can weeeear jeans, listen to music, dance, even kiss you.”

Uncertain what all this truly meant, Gavyn could sense his heart racing. Whether it was fair or not a part of him felt betrayed. She hadn’t been dishonest but this was still a shock. It complicated matters to say the least. But she’d trusted him to confide this.

“When do you decide?” he asked at last.

She looked away.

“I ... soon.”

His mouth was dry. They could hear sheep in a nearby field bleating as the rain came to an end.

“Mmmyyyy uuuunccllle left years ago during his *rumschpringa*. He sent me here, iiinnn, innnn case I don’t want to go back. I can go to school here.”

Gavyn brightened a little.

“School was never my thing. What would you study?”

Katura giggled, pleased that he’d asked.

“I like science and music and to write.”

As they discussed these subjects the storm clouds receded back into the ether, becoming mere highlights to the colorful array of purple and orange as the sun settled below the horizon.

“That all sounds great,” he decided when she’d finished. Her curiosity in these subjects far outweighed any he’d ever held. For him, school had been a chore, one soon to come to an end. But it meant the world to her, personally and because Amish custom forbid them to engage in school after eighth grade.

Katura’s smile waned.

“It’s what I will lose that frightens me.”

And the sorrow and stress returned to her features.

“The Amish world is aaaaall I’ve ever really known. The English world is violent, chaotic, and so many lack a sense of self-reliance. If I ddddddon’t return and accept on mmmmyyyy own the rules of Ordnung, I’ll bbbbbbbeeeee shhh, shhuunnnd. I can never go home. I can never see my family again. Ever.”

Katura was silently crying again. Gavyn wordlessly retrieved the bucket from the bottom of the well and set it atop stones. With nothing else to use he removed his shirt, dipped it in the bucket and gently began to scrub the paint from her skin and clothing. She offered no sign of protest.

The sun now slumbered and from the twilight sprang forth a vast and dazzling display of fireflies. A calming breeze wafted the creatures in a variety of directions. He finished and she took his shirt and removed the paint on him in kind. He regarded her as she worked. He’d never met anyone who faced a choice like Katura’s, caught between two such diametrically opposed

worlds. Someone, who by her very nature would never be truly at home in either, yet must choose only one path. Could she love him? How did all of this change his feelings for her? Did it?

Katura washed the last of the paint from his shirt and laid it across the width of the well's stones to dry. She removed her shoes and Gavyn noticed the large toe of her left foot was smashed, undoubtedly the source of her limp. And although she saw the unspoken question in his eyes she did not speak to it. Her father's judgment of her was the cause. His method of dealing with her stutter was to force her to stand with her toe under the rail of his rocking chair as he rocked. She hated him for it. Still, he was her father. She would not be judged by Gavyn. The choice to be made was hers and hers alone. Katura knew Gavyn could never fully appreciate the choice she faced but tonight she did not care. It meant the world to her that they were together. For the moment, nothing else mattered.

A church bell called out the hour. They sank beside the stones of the well together, holding hands and inclined their heads toward each other. They talked softly for hours. As one, they breathed in the air of an endless summer night.

### **Autumn**

They discovered Arabella some hours later at the ancient well. She was alone, shaking, and graced with another worldly expression of shock.

“Mother, Mother,” she repeated before collapsing.

Night now gripped the land so it was decided she should be taken to the nearest structure for care—to the great house. When she regained her senses in the morning she awoke to find the Lady of the house looking over her.

“Good morning. You’ve certainly caused quite the fuss,” the noblewoman declared.

Arabella shifted uncomfortably in the bed. Did she know of her and James’ secret affair? If only they’d been born of the same social class, such deceptions would be unnecessary.

“The Lady of the house honors me by tending to me personally,” Arabella acknowledged.

“Hardly. My son James has gone missing. Most of the household staff is out searching for him. They discovered you down at that ratty old well. Tell me, did you see my son yesterday?”

Arabella shook her head.

“No. I only saw that old woman.”

“Pray dear, what old woman?”

Arabella was reluctant to say much, fearing she’d be judged mentally unfit but the more description she gave she noticed that the noblewoman grew increasingly pale.

“You lie,” she finally spat, as she rose, clasping her hands together as she nervously crossed the room to a window framed by ornately decorated red curtains.

“You’ve seen her,” Arabella discerned.

The Lady of the great house shuddered.

“No. I have never seen her but there is a story in my family that has been passed down through the centuries of a local witch who was drowned in that well by my ancestors. It was said she foresaw the future. Since then she has become an omen, one that has appeared three times. Each appearance was just before some grave misfortune.”

“But you have never seen her?” Arabella stressed.

“Yes, foolish of me, isn’t it to believe such rubbish? Well, are you strong enough to get home or should I summon ...?”

“I’m ready to leave,” Arabella assured her.

“Very well.”

As the Lady made to remove a book and drinking glass she’d been using from the room, Arabella could not fail to notice the ring, inset with birthstones on her finger. It seemed ghastly familiar.

“Madame, if I may ask, how long have you had that ring?”

“This? Oh many years now. My husband pulled it out of the well when we first moved in here. It was in remarkable condition but still cost a small fortune to fully restore. I like it quite a bit but James’ birthstone always seems to fall out of it,” the Lady shrugged and pointed to the girl’s pile of clothing on a nearby chair before leaving the room.

Arabella’s head was hurting but she managed to get out of bed and dressed in short order. Her thoughts turned to James. Where could he have gone?

The Lady of the house was waiting for her just outside the door.



“I’ll show you out,” she evenly declared, leaving no doubt as to her intentions. She wanted this interloper out of her home as quickly as possible.

Arabella nodded and they started down the stairs.

“I’m grateful for your hospitality and for looking over me during my convalescence.”

“Yes. Fortunately for all our sakes it was short,” the Lady tersely noted. “Do keep an eye out for my son ... what now?”

The girl was frozen several steps behind her on the staircase staring in horror at one of the paintings. It was a painting of a well, surrounded by a spiraling staircase, framed by columns that led down to a floor with decorative tiles.

“But Mother ... that painting...”

“Get out girl, out, out of my house!” the Lady roared.

Arabella hurtled past her down the staircase and out the door into the mist-shrouded autumn morning. Dare she go back near the well? The journey home would take much longer if she didn’t and she needed to see if the bucket she’d been carrying yesterday was still there.

The solitary call of an unseen bird was the only noise that broke the silence of the dawn. As she tentatively approached the well her senses sought any sign that the old woman was near. But there was nothing. Still her pulse pounded in her ears and a damp clammy sweat clung to her skin. She had to will herself to take each step up the rise, closer to the well.

A black bird, whose ancient cry she’d been hearing, perched ominously atop the roof of the well. Every nerve in Arabella’s body bid her to leave but the sight of her overturned bucket at

the base of the well's stones was but a few steps away. She inched closer but the bird made no movement. Slowly, she lowered herself down to retrieve the errant bucket.

But as she reached down something on the stone face of the well caught her eye. For a moment all she could do was stare in disbelief. She had to know. Her shaking hand reached out and plucked the moss from one of the lower stones of the well. Time slipped away as her mind struggled to comprehend the meaning of what she was seeing. Arabella's breath caught in her chest. She felt as though she was suffocating as she staggered backward. The black bird began to shriek and kept screeching as her weak legs carried her away. The stone bore two names: Gavyn and Katura.

From that day forth, Arabella never returned to the well. And from that fateful day to this James has never been seen again.



*"Strange Seasons of the Wellspring" by Pete Planisek*

*Published by Enceladus Literary LLC*

*©2015*

*All Rights Reserved*