



by Rana Kelly

WITCH OF
THE BAYOU

Swamp mama

I jumped. Off a dock into black water. I collected rocks in hemp nets, tied them to my ankles, threw them off and followed them down. At the first, I held my breath and tried like hell to swim. But, then I remembered what I was there for. So I started sucking and swallowing. It didn't take long until I drowned and the swamp took me. The swamp has magick. The scarves, the hoodoo women, knew it, and although I was moon-pale and freckled, I knew it too. The water is still and full of dark. The swamp keeps long secrets. But she wouldn't keep me. She spit me out. I left a bad taste for her.

A man found me. A bit of me anyway. He found one of my arms. My elbow, wrist and hand—in a big, slatted, white gator belly—and called the law. The man took the gator home, skinned him and fried him and served him with sweet cornbread on his red oak table to his wife and three boys. A little Cajun recompense. A tribute to the dead. But it was me on that platter, under the pepper sauce and ketchup, inside the grease.

The parish didn't put me in a tomb. I didn't get a stone angel like maman. They had wreaths and flowers—magnolias and orchids and calla lilies—all limp and wan. They came out onto the street with brass and drums, their faces painted with grief and bones, and they sang and they laughed and they danced like chickens. Because they knew me, and they knew how I'd done it myself. I couldn't bother them anymore. A lot went on to make it this way. I don't have no name anymore. I just am now. Before I was dead, I was Amelia.

Death is like love. It acts different on everyone's back. Some people can't stand it. Some can't leave it alone. But sometimes it's the other way. Sometimes it follows them. They can't be rid of it. Those things I did before my hell and then my death have faded into old stains, dribbled on tissues, almost nothing. But I remember the swamp and her rage.

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hide it from daddy.
 "Don't wear your hair down, Melie. It wouldn't be wise."
 "Why, maman? Why did God give it to me, if I got to hide it?"
 "God didn't give you that hair, girl. That's the curse of Himself. It puts the Devil in men. Take a scarf, now, and tuck it away."
 "What does a man do when he got the Devil in him?"
 "When the time comes, and you don't have your hair covered, you'll know won't you?"

I stood in the sun.
 No other girl in the parish had the hair I had. My daddy told me that. He said it burned like fire, and made a body crazy with the heat. My maman tried to make me hide it, but I never did budge. Maman wore hats and scarves, always. She told me to

I was an evil person, and I had things on my mind that no lie would wash. Maybe I was a Loup Garou—the wolf in the bog. I don't know. But I did bad things and I ate souls. They were served up to me, hush puppies. I scratched symbols on trees, and plucked blonde hairs from small hairbrushes, stole toenails. I did bad things and made bad wishes and made sure they came true. My maman told me it was our hair. It's the women with red hair who made trouble, who could talk to stone and raise up deep things from the dead. She said the hair was a curse in our mother line, from a cold place by the sea, where they starved and died in puddles of blood. A woman born with the hair had to have done some bad thing to deserve it, she said. Mine was more than red. It was orange and gold and copper. People squinted at me when

H i m s e l f

I don't have a body. It's just an imprint, an outline in the air. I fade in and out without any hold. I'm just a blew-away with words streamling across me like wind across the bed sheets in October time. I only have faces and names and they trouble me. I see them every night. Sometimes, they see me too.

On Cypress Knees

I knew. It didn't take long after maman said that to me before he was creeping past my door at midnight. I heard his foot on the wooden floor every night after. It wasn't a secret to nobody. All of the parishes knew him and his lies. They hired him to take them to court, and come over for Sunday dinner, where I came too. He wore suspenders and white shirts with yellow sweat stains under his arms. I wore pink dresses and my patent leather shoes, because he bought all my dresses, even though I was eighteen. They saw me being crazy, and they knew he must be lying with me. Probably every night. But my daddy had nasty on everybody, because that's what lawyers are for. So no one spoke a whimper. Not even maman. I knew it was bad, it hurt so bad, and I told her so, but she didn't try to make him quit it.

"If you don't hide it, well why should I care of your complaining? Now he stays off of me. You, Amelia, girls like you get what they deserve, deserve what they get, and they get what they never keep."

After that, the swamp started talking to me. For nights on nights, I went to it, after daddy was through with me. I cried on the sand and told the cypress knees how he hurt me, and that maman would not help me. I sang, sometimes, and made rhymes. And soon I knew that maman was right about one more thing. I could raise up things. It was cold weather when the swamp took my maman. That's how I knew it was magic. No snake is going to come out of the swamp in the winter. But one did.

A long black moccasin, twice as long as a man, came and took maman. She was stiff and bloated and purple and had fang marks all over her when daddy found her. He came into my room, and found it, the snake, coiled and snoozing next to my cheek on the pillow. Daddy woke it up when he screamed, and it slithered on back home.

when he used me, hed not look at me. But his eyes were on my eyes, and I knew he wasn't daddy anymore.
 "You take the swamp's serpents into your bed, girl. And you will take me, and you will conceive."
 When he jerked and shuddered I cried to God and to the Swamp, snuffing and whimpering. It was hot on my thighs, and it left long red blisters all over my parts. Daddy stood up and walked out. He left the house and took the car into town. And it was no good business that he was up to.
 Sunday was a big day in the parish. Everyone fell into church, especially after all of the trouble I had done. The people were afraid of the going on, and so Sunday confessions were not missed by anyone but me. I wasn't to step foot in a church. That Sunday though, daddy brought me to town. He pulled up our car right in Vieux Carre, in front of a big wooden gallows, just built that morning.

Hanging Tree

On the Saturday after the storm quit, Joshua Tree came up to our big door. The swamp sent him, or maybe I did. He knew what my daddy was doing at midnight, outside of my door. Maybe the swamp told him, maybe she put it in his head. But he came to our big black door, and he didn't use the knocker. He had hard fists from working, and he pounded on our door like it was a tablet of marble, and he was making commandments, and my daddy was going to listen, no matter what. When I came down the stairs and saw him in the door way, saw daddy trying to push him out, I thought that I was saved.

Joshua's hair was ridged like a mean dog, his hands fistied by his side, then he shoved daddy.

"You will not do this to Amelia. You!"

"Who are you to come up into my house and assault me?" My daddy was nervous. I could see his green eyes stutter to gray, and the pores of his face were open and leaking.

"I am Joshua Tree."

"Simple Cajun bastard. You live in a shack outside of the parish. You eat snakes and polecats. And you come to my door, confronting me?"

"I was born in Paris, you Cajun bastard. My father is Etienne. I will kill you if you touch my Amelia again. I will kill you." He didn't touch daddy again, but instead walked out of the door.

I ran down the stairs and called out for Joshua, but daddy slammed the door. He hit me with his fist so hard that I fell down on the parlor floor. Daddy came with me, pinning me down with his legs. He grabbed my hair in his white hands and bit me on the lip.

"What did I tell you girl? He will not have you. No, no, Amelia Rose."

There was so much black in the backs of his eyes, I was afraid. Afraid of him like I never been before. He opened his pants and pushed into me. But it was different. He wasn't a man like he was before. Before,

the four o'clock sun. all the way grown. His eyes were silty and shimmered like the bayou in wrong, killing maman, and I cried for it. I stood there until he spoke her cry for maman. Someone had to, besides me. I knew what I did was and then he and his papa dragged it to the tomb, stood her up, and let

I watched him tilt her off of his truck bed, with ropes and levers, wings tight and folded, like she didn't know where to be.

maman, with flowing hair and streaming tears. Her hands were wadded, her fabric honed and sharp like folded paper. He left an anxious angel for me and smooch, their wings ending in marble quills, edges and ripples of their who watched over those standing graves. He'd set them on the slabs, robed but he cut angels and wreaths out of rock, weeping and writhing bodies makes bricks and stones for tombs. Joshua Tree was a carver, like his father, their truck in from the north, to bring stones to the graveyards. His father He didn't live in my parish, in a white house with columns. They drove His papa's name was Etienne, but they didn't have money like my family. near the skin of his face. Maman would have said he had snapping eyes.

That's where I saw Joshua Tree. Joshua Tree had good French lines be- I knew she would never come back. She was too scared of me.

I took the streetcar as far as it went. I followed the crumpled sidewalk below the old oak trees, whose roots hunched up out of the earth and cracked the concrete, breaking up the walks and the roads. I followed the roots, jumping the cracks for maman's sake, up to the tall white slabs streaked with oak slime and black rain, swamp water. I wandered around for hours, pulling up the scraggly weeds that had no mamoners and choked the mums and marigolds. I spent too much time around those doors to heaven, the tombs and the angels and the saints. I had no good business but waiting for someone to die, wondering if I could smell it, or feel what it felt like. And I looked for maman, even though I knew she would never come back.

Folded and Tights

"Is this your maman?" He stepped toward me, then backward all of the sudden, when the sun shined on my hair.

"Yes, she was my maman."

He doffed his hat and nodded to me.

"I am sorry for your loss, demoiselle."

"I know." I should have thanked him, as was proper, but the guilt was roiling in my belly like bad milk, so I turned away.

He didn't let me look away for long. He came up to me, and placed a hand on my shoulder and turned me to him. "Did you have your maman's hair?" He took a kerchief out of his pocket and wiped his face. He tried to put it back but it fell out of his pocket.

"No, I have my own." I stared at his hand like it was that snake, like it would reach up and bite me right then.

"Of course. It is beautiful." He dropped his arm.

"Like your angels?" I looked at the statue and then looked at him. "Why is she so worried?"

"Because she cannot find you. Mothers worry when they don't know where their daughters are."

"I wouldn't suppose you know that."

"But I do."

Seed

And when daddy came to me, for nights on out, I called him Joshua, and made him flinch from me. That was the power of Joshua Tree. My daddy still wanted me. He would be stiff and rigid inside of me for only a few minutes, until I whispered "I love Joshua Tree," and then daddy would shudder and spill, then creep away again, his feet creaking on the floor. But one night, he wouldn't quit my room. He knelt down, eased his head on my chest and listened to my heart.

"You cannot have that boy, Amelia Rose." Daddy's head was sweaty and I felt a wet spot on my night rail. He was still trembling from spilling his seed in me.

all down on the rooftops and filled the avenues with my rage. The thunder was full of my spells and my pain and it rained it into the swamp. For two weeks after, the swamp threw storms on the houses in the parish, sealing sixty-five souls before they slithered back Sparkling scaled bodies swarmed over the streets and into all of the cotton mouths and copperheads, orange and black serpents writhing When I came back to town, the snakes followed me. Big fat snakes, take my words just as I said them. It only took what was underneath.

I used a wet stick and spelled out Joshua's name in the sand. I scratched symbols into the cypress knees with my fingernails, and told in me. Full up in my guts was my hatred, and I didn't know any better than to make magic when you have the hate in you. The swamp didn't make my words just as I said them. It only took what was underneath.

I ran to the swamp like it was hollowing for me, cutting my feet on the sharp shells, scratching my eyes with palmetto leaves. I crawled into that black water, fixed that muddy sand, and scrubbed myself clean. The water was cold and full of the smell of alligators and turtles and dead things. I was knee deep, howling and barking like Himself had come up and spilled inside me. I was mad like a hornet and I held my face under, my hand on the back of my bald head until I almost fell back asleep. When I came out of the water, all of my hair had come back to me, longer and redder than before. It was as red as blood spilled on a knife blade, leaking out of a body.

I got up then, and ran downstairs and out the back door. I ran in my night gown and my bare feet, smashing the daffodils in our back garden, holding my bald head and screaming, my hatred on fire. I could smell the crushed greenness on me. It mixed with the smell of my incest and made me weep.

Dead Things

"He is mine, daddy." I pushed at his head, sick with him. Sick to death of him, and wanting Joshua Tree.

"You cannot have him. I forbid it." He grabbed my wrists and crossed them on my chest like I was a dead girl.

"He is mine, daddy. You had maman."

"She is gone now, and you took her." He squeezed my wrists hard, until I thought they would break. "You took her." He let me go and stood. He pulled up his trousers. His drawers had a dark red stain.

"I hate you. If you take him from me, I swear on maman that I'll kill you." Then I started cursing in a language I didn't know. I wasn't sure where the words came from, then, but they spilled out of me as I stood on my bed, expelling blood and daddy's seed from my womb. Strange rolling words, like the ones the scarves whispered when they thought their employers couldn't hear. They kept flowing from me, tangling over my lips and into my hair with soft sounds and ugly growls.

"Girl, you have sealed his fate." He threw out his arm then, and smacked me so hard I fell into the wall. My head exploded and I dreamed.

For three days I dreamed of dark things. Black water filled my mouth and swallowed me. I couldn't see anything but ropes and pulleys and oak trees, and a white handkerchief falling away from Joshua's dead face. When I woke I was in my bed. My gown was twisted up around my chest, and I had dried blood smeared on my belly. All of my hair, even the hair from my woman parts, was gone. I had snatches left on my head, but it was mostly bald. I still smelled like daddy, his seed, more than one time's worth was caked on my thighs, cracking and pulling at my tiny hairs as I moved.

Daddy was at my door.

"He won't want you without your hair."

"He loves me."

"You'll not have him, Amelia Rose. You'd as soon marry that statue in the square." He crossed the room to me and set the back of his hand to my cheek.