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Moss Witch

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PERHAPS THERE ARE NO more Moss Witches; the times are cast against them. But you can never be certain. In that sense they are like their mosses; they vanish from sites they are known to have flourished in, they are even declared extinct – and then they are there again, there or somewhere else, small, delicate, but triumphant – alive. Moss Witches, like mosses, do not compete; they retreat.

If you do want to look for a Moss Witch, go first to www.geoview.org. Download the map that shows ancient woodland and print it off. Then find the map that shows the mean number of wet days per year. Be careful to get the right map – you do not want the average rainfall map; quantity is not frequency. A wet day is any day in which just one millimetre of rain

falls; you can have a high rainfall with fewer wet days; and one millimetre a day is not a high rainfall. Print this map too, ideally on tracing paper. Lay it over the first map. The only known habitations of Moss Witches are in those places where ancient woodland is caressed by at least two hundred wet days a year. You will see at once that these are not common co-ordinates; there are only a few tiny pockets running down the west coasts of Scotland and Ireland. Like most other witches, Moss Witches have always inhabited very specific ecological niches. So far as we know, and there has been little contemporary research, Moss Witches prefer oak woods and particularly those where over twenty thousand years ago the great, grinding glaciers pushed large chunks of rock into apparently casual heaps and small bright streams leap through the trees. It is, of course, not coincidental that these are also the conditions that suit many types of moss – but Moss Witches are more private, and perhaps more sensitive, than the mosses they are associated with. Mosses can be blatant: great swathes of sphagnum on open moors; little frolicsome tufts on old slate roofs and walls; surprising mounds flourishing on corrugated asbestos; low-lying velvet on little-used tarmac roads; and weary, bullied, raked and poisoned carpets fighting for their lives on damp lawns. But Moss Witches lurk in the

green shade, hide on the north side of trees and make their homes in the dark crevasses of the terminal moraine. If you hope to find a Moss Witch this is where you must go. You must go silently and slowly, waiting on chance and accident. You must pretend you are not searching and you must be patient.

But be very careful. You go at your own peril. The last known encounter with a Moss Witch was very unfortunate.

The bryologist was, in fact, a very lovely young man, although his foxy-red hair and beard might have suggested otherwise. He was lean and fit and sturdy and he delighted in his own company and in solitary wild places. Like many botanists, his passion had come upon him early, in the long free rambles of an unhappy rural childhood, and it never bothered him at all that his peers thought botany was a girly subject and that real men preferred hard things; rocks if you must, stars if you were clever enough and dinosaurs if you had imagination. After taking his degree he had joined an expedition investigating epiphytes in the Peruvian rainforest for a year and had come back filled with a burning ecological fervour and a deep enthusiasm for fieldwork. He was, at this time, employed, to his considerable gratification and satisfaction, by a major European-funded academic research project trying to assess

the relative damage to Western European littoral habitats of pollution and global warming. His role was mainly to survey and record Scottish ancient woodlands and to compare the biodiversity of SSSIs with less-protected environments. He specialised in mosses and genuinely loved his subject.

So he came that March morning after a dawn start and a long and lovely hill walk down into a little valley, with a wide shallow river, a flat flood plain and steep sides: glacier carved. Here, hanging on the hillside, trapped between a swathe of ubiquitous Sitka spruce plantation, the haggly reedy bog of the valley floor and the open moor, was a tiny triangle of ancient oak wood with a subsidiary arm of hazel scrub running north. It was a lambent morning; the mist had lifted with sunrise and now shimmered softly in the distance; out on the hill he had heard the returning curlews bubbling on the wing and had prodded freshly laid frogspawn; he had seen his first hill lambs of the year – tiny twins, certainly born that night, their tails wagging their wiry bodies as they burrowed into their mother's udders. He had seen neither human being nor habitation since he had left the pub in the village now seven miles away. He surveyed the valley from above, checked his map and came down from the open hill, skirting the gorse and then a couple of gnarled hawthorns,

clambering over the memory of a stone wall, with real pleasure and anticipation. Under the still naked trees the light was green; on the floor, on the trees themselves, on rotted branches and on the randomly piled and strewn rocks – some as big as cottages, some so small he could have lifted them – there were mosses, mosses of a prolific abundance, a lapidary brightness, a soft density such as he had never seen before.

He was warm from his walking; he was tired from his early rising; and he was enchanted by this secret place. Smiling, contented, he lay down on a flat dry rock in the sheltered sunlight and fell asleep.

The Moss Witch did not see him. His hair was the colour of winterkilled bracken; his clothes were a modest khaki green; the sunlight flickered in a light breeze. She did not see him. She came wandering along between rocks and trees and sat down very close to where he slept, crossed her legs, straightened her back and began to sing the spells of her calling, as every Moss Witch must do each day. He woke to that low, strange murmur of language and music; he opened his eyes in disbelief but without shock. She was quite small and obviously very old; her face was carved with long wrinkles running up and down her forehead and cheeks; she was dressed raggedly, in a loose canvas skirt and with thick

uneven woollen socks and sandals obviously made from old silage bags. Her woollen jumper was hand-knitted, and not very well. She wore green mittens, which looked somehow damp. He was still sleepy, but when he moved a little and the Moss Witch turned sharply, what she saw was a smiling foxy face and, without thinking, she smiled back.

Tinker? he wondered. Walker like himself though not so well equipped? Gipsy? Mad woman, though a long way from anywhere? He felt some concern and said a tentative 'Hello'.

Even as she did not do so, the Moss Witch knew she should not answer; she should dissolve into the wood and keep her silence. But she was lonely. It had been a very long time. Long, long ago there had been meetings and greetings and gossip among the Moss Witches, quite a jolly social life indeed, with gatherings for wild Sabbats in the stone circles on the hills. There had been more wildwood and more witches then. She could not count the turnings of the world since she had last spoken to anyone and his smile was very sweet. She said 'Hello' back.

He sat up, held out his right hand and said, 'I'm Robert.'

She did not reply but offered her own, still in its mitten. It was knitted in a close-textured stitch and effortlessly he had a clear memory of his mother's

swift fingers working endlessly on shame-inducing homemade garments for himself and his sister and recalled that the pattern was called moss stitch and this made him suddenly and fiercely happy. When he shook her hand, small in his large one, he realised that she had only one finger.

There was a silence although they both went on looking at each other. Finally he said, 'Where do you come from?' Even as he asked he remembered the rules in Peru about not trying to interact with people you encountered deep in the jungle. Uncontacted tribes should remain uncontacted, for their own safety, cultural and physical; they had no immunities and were always vulnerable. He shrugged off the thought, smiling again, this time at his own fantasy. There were, after all, no uncontacted tribes in Britain.

'Gondwana, we think; perhaps we drifted northwards,' she said vaguely. 'No one is quite sure about before the ice times; that was the alternate generation, though not of course haploid. But here, really. I've lived here for a very long time.'

He was startled, but she looked so mild and sweet in the dappled green wood that he could not bring himself to admit that she said what he thought she said. Instead, he turned his sudden movement into a stretch for his knapsack, and after

rummaging for a moment produced his flask. He unscrewed the top and held it out to her. 'Would you like some water?'

She stretched out her left hand and took the flask from him. Clamping it between her knees, she pulled up her right sleeve and then poured a little water onto her wrist. He stared.

After a pause she said, 'Urgh. Yuck. It's horrible,' and shook her arm vigorously, then bent forward and wiped the splashes delicately from the moss where they had fallen. 'I'm sorry,' she said, 'that was rude, but there is something in it, some chemical thing and I'm rather sensitive... we all are.'

She was mad, he realised, and with it felt a great tenderness – a mad old woman miles from anywhere and in need of looking after. He dreaded the slow totter back to the village, but pushed his irritation away manfully. The effort banished the last of his sleepiness and he got to his feet, pulled out his notebook and pen and began to look around him. Within moments he realised that he had never seen mosses like this; in variety, in luxuriance and somehow in joy. These were joyful mosses and in uniquely healthy condition.

There were before his immediate eye most of the species he was expecting and several he knew instantly were on the Vulnerable or Critically

Endangered lists from the Red Data Book and then some things he did not recognise. He felt a deep excitement and came back to his knapsack. She was still sitting there quite still and seemed ancient and patient. He pulled out his checklist and taxa.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked him.

‘I’m seeing what’s here – making a list.’

‘I can tell you,’ she said. ‘I know them all.’

He smiled at her. ‘I’m a scientist,’ he said. ‘I’m afraid I need their proper names.’

‘Of course,’ she said, ‘sit down. I’ve got 154 species here, not counting the liverworts and the hornworts, of course. I can give you those too. I think I’m up to date although you keep changing your minds about what to call them, don’t you? My names may be a bit old-fashioned.’

She chanted the long Latin names, unflinching.

Leucobryum glaucum. Campylopus pyriformis. Mnium hornum. Atrichum undulatum. Dicranella heteromalla. Bazzania trilobata. Lepidozia cupressina. Colura calyptrifolia. Ulota crispa...

More names than he could have thought of, and some he did not even know. He sat on the rock with his list on his knee, ticking them off as they rolled out of her mouth; there seemed no taxonomic order in her listing, moving from genera to genera along some different system of her own, but her tongue was

elegant and nimble around the Latin names. He was both bemused and amused.

Once he stopped her. *Orthodontium gracile*, she sang, and paused smiling. He looked up and she was glancing at him quizzically. 'The slender thread moss.' She looked sly.

'No' he said, 'no, you can't have that here. It grows in the Weald, on the sandstone scarps.'

She laughed. 'Well done,' she said. 'That was a sort of test. But I do have it. Come and see.'

She stood up and beckoned to him; he followed her round a massive granite boulder and up the slope. There behind a hazel thicket and free of the oak trees was a little and obviously artificial heap of sandstone, placed carefully in strata to replicate the scarps of Cheshire and the Weald. And there were two small cushions of *Orthodontium gracile*.

'I like it very much,' she said. 'I like it because it is a bit like me – most people don't know how to see it. It is not as rare as you think. So I invited it in.'

'You mustn't do that,' he said shocked. 'It's protected. You mustn't gather or collect it.'

'No, of course not,' she said. 'I didn't. I invited it.' She smiled at him shyly and went on, 'I think perhaps you and your people are more like *Orthodontium lineare*, more successful but not native.'

Then she sat down and sang the rest of her list.

After that she took his hand in her maimed one and led him down beside the stream which gurgled and sang in small falls and cast a fine mist of spray on the banks where rare mosses and common ferns flourished. He knew then that something strange was happening to him, there in the oak wood, although he did not know what. It was a magical space. It said a lot for his true devotion to bryophytes and his research that he went on looking, that he was not diverted. But time somehow shook itself and came out differently from before – and the space was filled with green, green mosses and her gentle bubbling knowledge. She spoke the language of science and turned it into a love song through her speaking and the mosses sang back the same tune in harmony.

Sometime after noon they came back to where they had started. He was hungry and got out his lunchbox. She sat down beside him.

‘Have you got something to eat?’ he asked.

‘No.’

‘Do you want to share mine?’

‘I’m non-vascular,’ she said. ‘I get what I need from the rain. That’s why my wrinkles run up and down instead of across. He looked at her face and saw that it was so. She went on, ‘And of course it does mean that I revive very quickly even if I do get dried out. That’s why I can go exploring, or for that

matter,' she looked contented, almost smug, 'sit out in the sun with you.'

None of this seemed as strange to him as it should have seemed. He had reached a point of suspension, open to anything she told him.

'Are you...' but it did not feel right to ask her what she was. He changed the sentence, 'Are you all alone?'

'Yes, sadly,' she said in a matter-of-fact voice. 'I hoped for a long time that I would be monoicous. Nearly half of us are. But no, alas. I'm thoroughly female and as you can imagine that makes things difficult nowadays.' After a little pause she smiled at him, slightly shamefaced, and said in a confessional sort of tone, 'As a matter of fact, that's what happened to my fingers. I was much younger then, of course; I wouldn't try it now, but I did so want a daughter. I thought I might be clonal. You know, I'm not vascular, sensitive to pollution, often misidentified or invisible, all those things; I hoped I might be totipotent as well. So I cut off my fingers and tried to regenerate the cells. But it didn't work. It was a bad mistake. I think we must have been, though, somewhere in the lineage, because of our disjunctions and wide dispersal. That's one of the problems of evolution – losses and gains, losses and gains. Vascular was a smart idea, you have to admit, even at the price of

all those vulgar coloured flowers.'

He realised suddenly there were no snowdrops; no green sprouts of bluebells, wild garlic or anemone; no primrose or foxgloves. 'Don't you like flowers?'

'Bloody imperialists,' she replied crossly, 'they invaded, imposed their own infrastructure and ruined our culture, stole our land. And anyway, they're garish – I do honestly prefer the elegance, the subtle beauty of seta, capsules and peristomes.'

He did too, he realised, although he had never thought of it before.

They sat together, contented, in the wildwood, in the space outside of time.

But he lacked her long patience. He could not just sit all day, and eventually he roused himself, shook off the magic, stood up and took out his collecting kit: the little glass bottles with their plastic screw tops, a sharp knife, a waterproof pencil and a squared paper chart.

'What are you doing?' she asked him.

'I'm just going to collect some samples,' he said, 'so we can get them under the microscope.'

'You can't do that.'

'Yes, it's fine,' he said reassuringly. 'I've got a certificate. This is one of the richest sites I've ever seen. We'll get a team in here, later in the year, but

I need some samples now – just to prove it, you know; no one will believe me otherwise.’

‘I really cannot let you do that,’ she said quietly, still sitting gently on the gentle ground.

But he just smiled kindly at her and moved away up the slope. He bent over a fine little feathered mat: a *sematophyllum* – *S. micans* perhaps; he knelt down, took his knife and scraped along its underside, pulling free its anchoring rhizoids and removing a tiny tuft. He opened one of his bottles, popped in the small green piece and screwed up the top. So she killed him. She was sorry, of course, but for witches it is always duty before pleasure.

Quite soon she knew, with great sadness, that she would have to move on. They would come looking for him and would find her, and rather obviously the crushed skull where she had hit him with the granite rock could not have been an accident.

Later still she realised that she could not just leave his body there. If they found that and did not find her, they might blame some other poor soul, some solitary inhabitant of wood or hill, some vagrant or loner. Someone like her, but not her. Justice is not really an issue that much concerns Moss Witches, but she did not want the hills tramped by heavy-footed policemen or ripped and squashed by quad bikes and 4X4s.

The evening came and with it the chill of March air. Venus hung low in the sky, following the sun down behind the hill, and the high white stars came out one by one, visible through the tree branches. She worked all through the darkness. First she dehydrated the body by stuffing all his orifices with dry sphagnum, more biodegradable than J-cloth and more native than sponge, of which, like all MossWitches, she kept a regular supply for domestic purposes. It sucked up his body fluids, through mouth and ears and anus. She thought too its anti-septic quality might protect her mosses from his contamination after she was gone.

While he was drying out, she went up the hill above the wood and found a ewe that had just given birth and milked it. She mixed the milk with yoghurt culture. She pounded carefully selected ground mosses in her pestle, breaking them down into parts as small as she could manage; she mixed the green ooze with the milk and culture.

When he was desiccated and floppy, she stripped his clothing off, rolled him onto his back among the thick mosses under the rocks and planted him, brushing the cell-rich mixture deep into the nooks and crannies of his body and pulling thicker, more energetic moss clumps over his now cool flesh. At first she was efficient and businesslike, but later

she allowed her imagination to cavort. She painted *Aplodon wormskioldii* on his forehead and where his toes poked up through her main planting of *Polytrichum* because it grew on the dead bodies of deer and sheep and might flourish on his bones too. She festooned his genitals with *Plagiochila atlantica* because its little curling fronds were so like the curly mass there. She carried down a rock richly coated with the lichen *Xanthoria parietina* because it was the colour of his foxy hair. She looked at her little arrangement; it was clever, witty even, and secure, but she still felt there was something missing.

After a while she knew. She went round the massive granite boulder and up the slope beyond the oak trees and behind the hazel thicket to her artificial sandstone scarp. There she hacked out one of the cushions of *Orthodontium gracile* on a piece of the reddish rock. Back where he lay, she uncovered his face again, forced his mouth open and placed the sandstone in it, the little moss resting gently on his smiling lips. It was very pleasing to her, because he had been such a sweet man and knew the names of mosses.

Then she spoke clearly and firmly to all the mosses, the liverworts and the lichens she had planted. She told them to grow fast, to grow strong and to grow where she had told them. Bryophytes are not

commonly obedient or compliant; they tend to follow their own rules, coming and going at their own random whim, but she knew this time they would do as she asked because they loved her. Within weeks his body would be part of the moss wood, a green irregular shape among so many others.

Then, sadly, singing all their names one last time, she turned northwards. She climbed high up the hillside and lay down and watched the dawn. When the morning breeze came with first light, she opened her mouth wide and exhaled; and her microscopic spore flowed out between her sixty-four little hydroscopic teeth and was caught by the wind, and carried up into the higher air currents that circulate the earth.

And then... well nobody knows.

Perhaps she blows there still, carried on those upper airs, waiting for a new and quieter time when witches and mosses can flourish.

Perhaps she blew north and west and alighted at last in another small fragment of ancient woodland, a tight ravine leading down to the sea or a small island out beyond the uttermost west, and she lives there still.

Moss witches, like mosses, do not compete; they retreat.

Perhaps there are no more Moss Witches; the

times are cast against them. But if you go into ancient woodland and it glows jewel green with moss and is damp and quiet and lovely, then be very careful.