

There is a legend that the well found in the garden of a rotting cottage house can grant wishes. I'm not sure who came up with such a nonsensical rumor, nor how anyone would be foolish enough to believe it. However, just like clockwork, at least one person daily would come to the dry well to tell it their wish. I'd end up watching from the window or the sideline, observing how people would hurry to the well as they trampled over peonies and daisies, how they'd wish so desperately with all their might.

You can learn a lot about a person and their beliefs from what they consider unnatural. When you're as attentive and as bored as I am, you begin studying those around you to understand them. And I can see their faith in the supposed magical well. It's in the way that pregnant mothers hobble over to the rotting cobblestone, dropping pearls and coins for a healthy term. Or how the children toss the flowers down, laughter on their faces as they ruin my hard work at gardening. I try to pay them no mind, only ever coming out to collect my gifts.

Perhaps my involvement causes the town folks to believe in such absurdities, for items do not simply disappear into thin air from my molding box. Must be a witch, they all whisper in the streets. Others like to call it the work of a fae or a djinn. I cannot blame them, but I can't earn my keep if the rumors go away. So, I let them continue to talk. After all, why would I ruin such a good thing when their wishes come true in the end?

One day from the comfort of the roof, I watch as another person appears to make a wish. How delusional is he, this elderly man who approaches my treasure box. I've never seen someone so old believe in magic before, nor has anyone gifted me strawberries, of all things.

I wouldn't call myself a greedy woman, as many people have given fruit as an offering. It's how I keep myself fed, but I had never received such a small item... and so little! That man had left me two measly pieces. How

am I supposed to survive off that?

And what a strange man he is. He comes with no wish, only uttering the name Laci between his dried lips. He speaks her name with such love, with such sorrow, offering the fruit to this woman. I get closer to him and inspect his all-knowing eyes. How many years had this man seen? Has he seen how time is slipping from him, how his cracking bones are reaching the end?

How soon will he succumb to his demise, I wonder.

He comes to visit my well for weeks, his familiar cane clicking against the path every day as he comes, always dropping the familiar sweetness of strawberries and calling for her. He'd remain there for hours and talk to no one but himself. At first, I had ignored his blabbering, watching from a distance as he rattled on like a crazed man. But eventually, curiosity got the best of me, and I took the place beside him. Perhaps he had sensed my presence or felt a shift in the breeze as I floated towards that fading well. But he began to speak through me and into the air as I listened to him speak about Laci, his soulmate.

He spoke with reverence about how he had first loved her from afar, that he was too poor to provide for her. And how, despite the opposition, they earnestly longed for one another. He adored her—she was the end and beginning of his world. He spoke about how he had planned a future for them here at this house. How both he and Laci had wished at this very well for a life together with children of their own.

But life was cruel to his precious Laci, whom he had lost during the birth of his only child. It was why he recently began to frequent this location, the cottage and the well that had clearly been abandoned. He has held himself back from making it his home, unable to live his dream without her. He sought for even a spark of Laci, of her warmth.

I wish I could have asked if he would have chosen this path if he knew he'd lose her. Why did he long for her to come back, even for a moment, so that he could see her

smile, catch a whiff of her perfume, or hear the chime of laughter? I pitied him, the man who lost his first love and went decades without her, the man who clung to her memory with such loyalty.

I should have asked him how he could still love her.

Alas, I never found the courage to call out to him. I feared that revealing myself to him would have been too harsh to the man. As the end of summer approached, I began to see him less. Perhaps his age was catching up to him, his limbs creaking louder by the week. He was slowly becoming a fading memory in my mind, a ghost of who I thought him to be. He was slipping away from me, and I only could wish that I'd hear his whisky-warm voice again.

Just once more, to remember his warmth after so many years.

It is not until I sense the familiar offering of the sweet fruit that I'm hopeful of him.

Perhaps I can finally ask him, reveal to him my truth. But to my disappointment, a young mother and her toddler appear instead. I watch as she clasps her hands together, shuts her eyes, and tells me her wish.

*To the goddess, I wish for my father to reunite with his Laci.*

Sorrow took over my soul over the sincerity, over her desire. I dreaded the news of his demise, of the man whom I had bonded with. And for the one wish, the one, I will forever yearn to grant. I lay beside his gravestone and wept for my husband, who I'd never see again.