



The Girls Who Drank the Moon

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Award-winning author of *THE WITCH'S BOY*

Also by Kelly Barnhill



The Mostly True Story of Jack
Iron Hearted Violet
The Witch's Boy

*The Girl
Who Drank
the Moon*

Kelly Barnhill



ALGONQUIN YOUNG READERS • 2016

*For Ted,
with love.*



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Acknowledgments

About the Author

About Algonquin

1.

In Which a Story Is Told

Yes.

There is a witch in the woods. There has always been a witch.

Will you stop your fidgeting for once? My stars! I have never seen such a fidgety child.

No, sweetheart, I have not seen her. No one has. Not for ages. We've taken steps so that we will never see her.

Terrible steps.

Don't make me say it. You already know, anyway.

Oh, I don't know, darling. No one knows why she wants children. We don't know why she insists that it must always be the very youngest among us. It's not as though we could just ask her. She hasn't been seen. We make sure that she will not be seen.

Of course she exists. What a question! Look at the woods! So dangerous! Poisonous smoke and sinkholes and boiling geysers and terrible dangers every which way. Do you think it is so by accident? Rubbish! It was the Witch, and if we don't do as she says, what will become of us?

You really need me to explain it?

I'd rather not.

Oh, hush now, don't cry. It's not as though the Council of Elders is coming for you, now is it. You're far too old.

From our family?

Yes, dearest. Ever so long ago. Before you were born. He was a beautiful boy.

Now finish your supper and see to your chores. We'll all be up early tomorrow. The Day of Sacrifice waits for no one, and we must all be present to thank the child who will save us for one more year.

Your brother? How could I fight for him? If I had, the Witch would have killed us all and then where would we be? Sacrifice one or sacrifice all. That is the way of the world. We couldn't change it if we tried.

Enough questions. Off with you. Fool child.

2.

In Which an Unfortunate Woman Goes Quite Mad

Grand Elder Gherland took his time that morning. The Day of Sacrifice only came once a year, after all, and he liked to look his best during the sober procession to the cursed house, and during the somber retreat. He encouraged the other Elders to do the same. It was important to give the populace a show.

He carefully dabbed rouge on his sagging cheeks and lined his eyes with thick streaks of kohl. He checked his teeth in the mirror, ensuring they were free of debris or goop. He loved that mirror. It was the only one in the Protectorate. Nothing gave Gherland more pleasure than the possession of a thing that was unique unto him. He liked being *special*.

The Grand Elder had ever so many possessions that were unique in the Protectorate. It was one of the perks of the job.

The Protectorate—called the Cattail Kingdom by some and the City of Sorrows by others—was sandwiched between a treacherous forest on one side and an enormous bog on the other. Most people in the Protectorate drew their livelihoods from the Bog. There was a future in bogwalking, mothers told their children. Not much of a future, you understand, but it was better than nothing. The Bog was full of Zirin shoots in the spring and Zirin flowers in the summer and Zirin bulbs in the fall—in addition to a wide array of medicinal and borderline magical plants that could be harvested, prepared, treated, and sold to the Traders from the other side of the forest, who in turn transported the fruits

of the Bog to the Free Cities, far away. The forest itself was terribly dangerous, and navigable only by the Road.

And the Elders owned the Road.

Which is to say that Grand Elder Gherland owned the Road, and the other Elders had their cut. The Elders owned the Bog, too. And the orchards. And the houses. And the market squares. Even the garden plots.

This was why the families of the Protectorate made their shoes out of reeds. This was why, in lean times, they fed their children the thick, rich broth of the Bog, hoping that the Bog would make them strong.

This was why the Elders and their families grew big and strong and rosy--cheeked on beef and butter and beer.

The door knocked.

“Enter,” Grand Elder Gherland mumbled as he adjusted the drape of his robe.

It was Antain. His nephew. An Elder-in-Training, but only because Gherland, in a moment of weakness, had promised the ridiculous boy’s more ridiculous mother. But that was unkind. Antain was a nice enough young man, nearly thirteen. He was a hard worker and a quick study. He was good with numbers and clever with his hands and could build a comfortable bench for a tired Elder as quick as breathing. And, despite himself, Gherland had developed an inexplicable, and growing, fondness for the boy.

But.

Antain had big ideas. Grand notions. And *questions*. Gherland furrowed his brow. Antain was—how could he put it? *Overly keen*. If this kept up, he’d have to be dealt with, blood or no. The thought of it weighed upon Gherland’s heart, like a stone.

“UNCLE GHERLAND!” Antain nearly bowled his uncle over with his insufferable enthusiasm.

“Calm yourself, boy!” the Elder snapped. “This is a solemn occasion!”

The boy calmed visibly, his eager, doglike face tilted toward the ground. Gherland resisted the urge to pat him gently on the head. “I have been sent,” Antain continued in a mostly soft voice, “to tell you that the other Elders are ready. And all the populace waits along the route. Everyone is accounted for.”

“Each one? There are no shirkers?”

“After last year, I doubt there ever will be again,” Antain said with a shudder.

“Pity.” Gherland checked his mirror again, touching up his rouge. He rather enjoyed teaching the occasional lesson to the citizens of the Protectorate. It clarified things. He tapped the sagging folds under his chin and frowned. “Well, Nephew,” he said with an artful swish of his robes, one that had taken him over a decade to perfect. “Let us be off. That baby isn’t going to sacrifice itself, after all.” And he flowed into the street with Antain stumbling at his heels.



Normally, the Day of Sacrifice came and went with all the pomp and gravity that it ought. The children were given over without protest. Their numb families mourned in silence, with pots of stew and nourishing foods heaped into their kitchens, while the comforting arms of neighbors circled around them to ease their bereavement.

Normally, no one broke the rules.

But not this time.

Grand Elder Gherland pressed his lips into a frown. He could hear the mother’s howling before the procession turned onto the final street. The citizens began to shift uncomfortably where they stood.

When they arrived at the family’s house, an astonishing sight met the

Council of Elders. A man with a scratched-up face and a swollen lower lip and bloody bald spots across his skull where his hair had been torn out in clumps met them at the door. He tried to smile, but his tongue went instinctively to the gap where a tooth had just recently been. He sucked in his lips and attempted to bow instead.

“I am sorry, sirs,” said the man—the father, presumably. “I don’t know what has gotten into her. It’s like she’s gone mad.”

From the rafters above them, a woman screeched and howled as the Elders entered the house. Her shiny black hair flew about her head like a nest of long, writhing snakes. She hissed and spat like a cornered animal. She clung to the ceiling beams with one arm and one leg, while holding a baby tightly against her breast with the other arm.

“GET OUT!” she screamed. “You *cannot* have her. I spit on your faces and curse your names. Leave my home at once, or I shall tear out your eyes and throw them to the crows!”

The Elders stared at her, openmouthed. They couldn’t *believe* it. No one fought for a doomed child. It simply wasn’t *done*.

(Antain alone began to cry. He did his best to hide it from the adults in the room.)

Gherland, thinking fast, affixed a kindly expression on his craggy face. He turned his palms toward the mother to show her that he meant no harm. He gritted his teeth behind his smile. All this kindness was nearly killing him.

“*We* are not taking her at all, my poor, misguided girl,” Gherland said in his most patient voice. “The *Witch* is taking her. We are simply doing as we’re told.”

The mother made a guttural sound, deep in her chest, like an angry bear.

Gherland laid his hand on the shoulder of the perplexed husband and gave a gentle squeeze. “It appears, my good fellow, that you are right: your wife *has*

gone mad.” He did his best to cover his rage with a façade of concern. “A rare case, of course, but not without precedent. We must respond with compassion. She needs care, not blame.”

“LIAR,” the woman spat. The child began to cry, and the woman climbed even higher, putting each foot on parallel rafters and bracing her back against the slope of the roof, trying to position herself in such a way that she could remain out of reach while she nursed the baby. The child calmed instantly. “If you take her,” she said with a growl, “I will find her. I will find her and take her back. You see if I won’t.”

“And face the Witch?” Gherland laughed. “All on your own? Oh, you pathetic, lost soul.” His voice was honey, but his face was a glowing ember. “Grief has made you lose your senses. The shock has shattered your poor mind. No matter. We shall heal you, dear, as best we can. Guards!”

He snapped his fingers, and armed guards poured into the room. They were a special unit, provided as always by the Sisters of the Star. They wore bows and arrows slung across their backs and short, sharp swords sheathed at their belts. Their long braided hair looped around their waists, where it was cinched tight—a testament to their years of contemplation and combat training at the top of the Tower. Their faces were implacable as stones, and the Elders, despite their power and stature, edged away from them. The Sisters were a frightening force. Not to be trifled with.

“Remove the child from the lunatic’s clutches and escort the poor dear to the Tower,” Gherland ordered. He glared at the mother in the rafters, who had gone suddenly very pale. “The Sisters of the Star know what to do with broken minds, my dear. I’m sure it hardly hurts at all.”

The Guard was efficient, calm, and utterly ruthless. The mother didn’t stand a chance. Within moments, she was bound, hobbled, and carried away. Her howls echoed through the silent town, ending suddenly when the Tower’s great

wooden doors slammed shut, locking her inside.

The baby, on the other hand, once transferred into the arms of the Grand Elder, whimpered briefly and then turned her attention to the sagging face in front of her, all wobbles and creases and folds. She had a solemn look to her—calm, skeptical, and intense, making it difficult for Gherland to look away. She had black curls and black eyes. Luminous skin, like polished amber. In the center of her forehead, she had a birthmark in the shape of a crescent moon. The mother had a similar mark. Common lore insisted that such people were special. Gherland disliked lore, as a general rule, and he certainly disliked it when citizens of the Protectorate got it in their heads to think themselves better than they were. He deepened his frown and leaned in close, wrinkling his brow. The baby stuck out her tongue.

Horrible child, Gherland thought.

“Gentlemen,” he said with all the ceremony he could muster, “it is time.” The baby chose this particular moment to let loose a large, warm, wet stain across the front of Gherland’s robes. He pretended not to notice, but inwardly he fumed.

She had done it on purpose. He was sure of it. What a revolting baby.

The procession was, as usual, somber, slow, and insufferably plodding. Gherland felt he might go mad with impatience. Once the Protectorate’s gates closed behind them, though, and the citizens returned with their melancholy broods of children to their drab little homes, the Elders quickened their pace.

“But why are we running, Uncle?” Antain asked.

“Hush, boy!” Gherland hissed. “And keep up!”

No one liked being in the forest, away from the Road. Not even the Elders. Not even Gherland. The area just outside the Protectorate walls was safe enough. In theory. But everyone knew someone who had accidentally wandered too far. And fell into a sinkhole. Or stepped in a mud pot, boiling off

most of their skin. Or wandered into a swale where the air was bad, and never returned. The forest was dangerous.

They followed a winding trail to the small hollow surrounded by five ancient trees, known as the Witch's Handmaidens. Or six. *Didn't it used to be five?* Gherland glared at the trees, counted them again, and shook his head. There were six. No matter. The forest was just getting to him. Those trees were almost as old as the world, after all.

The space inside of the ring of trees was mossy and soft, and the Elders laid the child upon it, doing their best not to look at her. They had turned their backs on the baby and started to hurry away when their youngest member cleared his throat.

"So. We just leave her here?" Antain asked. "That's how it's done?"

"Yes, Nephew," Gherland said. "That is how it's done." He felt a sudden wave of fatigue settling on his shoulders like an ox's yoke. He felt his spine start to sag.

Antain pinched his neck—a nervous habit that he couldn't break. "Shouldn't we wait for the Witch to arrive?"

The other Elders fell into an uncomfortable silence.

"Come again?" Elder Raspin, the most decrepit of the Elders, asked.

"Well, surely . . ." Antain's voice trailed off. "Surely we must wait for the Witch," he said quietly. "What would become of us if wild animals came first and carried her off?"

The other Elders stared at the Grand Elder, their lips tight.

"Fortunately, Nephew," he said quickly, leading the boy away, "that has never been a problem."

"But—" Antain said, pinching his neck again, so hard he left a mark.

"But nothing," Gherland said, a firm hand on the boy's back, striding quickly down the well-trodden path.

And, one by one, the Elders filed out, leaving the baby behind.

They left knowing—all but Antain—that it was not a matter of *if* the child were eaten by animals, but rather that she surely *would be*.

They left her knowing that there surely *wasn't* a witch. There never *had* been a witch. There were only a dangerous forest and a single road and a thin grip on a life that the Elders had enjoyed for generations. The Witch—that is, the belief in her—made for a frightened people, a subdued people, a compliant people, who lived their lives in a saddened haze, the clouds of their grief numbing their senses and dampening their minds. It was terribly convenient for the Elders' unencumbered rule. Unpleasant, too, of course, but that couldn't be helped.

They heard the child whimper as they tramped through the trees, but the whimpering soon gave way to the swamp sighs and birdsong and the woody creaking of trees throughout the forest. And each Elder felt as sure as sure could be that the child wouldn't live to see the morning, and that they would never hear her, never see her, never think of her again.

They thought she was gone forever.

They were wrong, of course.