



THE
BEAST
IS AN
ANIMAL

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For Galen

*The Beast is an animal
You'd better lock the Gate
Or when it's dark, It comes for you
Then it will be too late*

*The Beast is an animal
Hear It scratch upon your door
It sucks your soul then licks the bowl
And sniffs around for more*

*The Beast is an animal
It has a pointy chin
It eats you while you sleep at night
Leaves nothing but your skin*

—Old Byd Nursery Rhyme

THIS
IS
WHERE
THE
STORY
STARTS.

*W*ay back in the beginning, there were two sisters. They were born minutes apart, each with a velvet coat of black hair on the top of her perfect head. The mother had labored for two full days, and it was a miracle she survived. At least hourly the midwife feared she'd lose the mother and the babies with her. But the girls were born with lusty cries, and the mother wept with relief. The midwife laid each girl in the crook of the mother's spent arms. When one of the girls rolled from the mother's grip, the midwife caught her not a second before she crashed to the floor. At the time, the midwife thought it was a stroke of luck. Before too many months had passed, she would wish she had let the evil thing drop.

But that was later. In the meantime, there were other reasons for feeling dismay at the new arrivals. Two healthy babies might

seem like a blessing, but in this village of half-empty larders and dry fields, the birth of two girls was more a cause for condolence than for celebration. The villagers shook their heads and hoped that such ill fortune wasn't contagious.

The father was pitied. He must surely have been hoping for a son—another set of strong hands to plant and harvest. A farmer needed a capable boy to mend the fences, and to keep his goats and sheep from being preyed upon by wolves.

The mother was regarded as something worse than pitiable. It would have been better not to have any babies at all than to give birth to two girls. Some even said it was an act of spite on the mother's part. Only a truly disobedient woman would do such a thing.

The mother had always been the quiet sort, keeping to herself and her kitchen garden. The farm where she and her husband lived was the farthest from the center of town. No one passed by their door on the way to anywhere else. No one popped in for a chat. If you were to visit you'd have to do so on purpose. And no one ever did.

From the start, the mother noticed something interesting about her girls. But she said nothing about it, not even to her husband. The girls were identical matches—the same black hair, the same round, gray eyes. They even had the same birthmark, a vaguely star-shaped blotch on the back of one calf. But there was one difference between the twins. The two-minutes-older girl always reached for things with her left hand, and the two-minutes-younger girl with her right. The older had the birthmark on her left calf, and the younger on her right. The black

hair on their heads curled in exactly the same way, but in opposite directions. The girls were mirror images of each other—identical, but not identical.

Such things might not worry a mother when times were prosperous, when crops were healthy and there was plenty to eat. But when rains refused to come and harsh winter was followed by parched summer, any little thing could become a cause for fear. And there was something just strange enough about her twin daughters to give the mother an uneasiness that fluttered in her chest.

The girls grew, and still the rains didn't come. Clouds would gather, and the town's hopes along with them, but not a drop would ever fall. As summer neared its end, and the prospect of another long, hungry winter settled in the villagers' minds, their dread turned into fear, which transformed into suspicion. What had changed, they asked themselves, since that short time ago before the drought, when they'd all had enough to eat?

A healthy, self-preserving instinct told the mother to keep her girls away from those narrowed eyes. And for a long time they were safe. But one day a neighbor came visiting with a basket of eggs she'd had trouble selling in town. The mother's chickens rarely laid enough, and her husband did love eggs, so she invited the woman into her kitchen to settle on a price.

The neighbor sat at the mother's table, looking around with curious eyes. She noted with a spark of envy the clean floors, the mother's white apron, and the little girls' chubby cheeks. The children were barely a year old but already walking and babbling nonsense. The neighbor watched while the older girl

reached out with her left hand, and the younger girl reached out with her right. Then she noticed the funny star-shaped birthmarks on their smooth, round calves. A tickle of recognition started at the nape of the neighbor's neck and licked across her forehead. This was something different—very different indeed.

The neighbor didn't return home straightaway. Instead she went to the blacksmith, who was chatting over the fence with the innkeeper. The High Elder's wife passed not a few minutes later, and she couldn't help overhearing what they were discussing. Normally she wasn't much for gossip, but this was important news: One of her neighbors had discovered what was different in the village since last year. It was two mirror-image babies, both given a star-shaped birthmark by The Beast. The Evil One. The One Who Kept the Rain Away.

The father had only just returned from the fields for the day and sat down to supper with the mother when their meal was interrupted by a firm knock on the door. In truth, the mother and father had heard the dozen or so villagers approaching their farmhouse long before the knock. He had raised his eyebrows to his wife, and then looked through the front window, out into the summer twilight. There was a low murmur of voices through the crickets. The mother moved to the door but the father reached for her shoulder and held her back. Together they waited for the knock.

The mother and father heard the shuffling of feet on the path to their front step. Then one set of feet emerged from the others, followed by the rap of knuckles on wood. The father went to the door and listened to what the villagers had to say.

The villagers were quite reasonable. They didn't blame him, they said. The drought was obviously the work of a witch, and they were willing to believe that he was an innocent victim. After all, they knew it wouldn't have been his choice to have a daughter, much less two daughters, much less two daughters with the mark of The Beast. Clearly, they said, his wife was a witch, and those mirror twins were the witch's evil offspring from her unholy mating with It—The Beast. The father was given two choices: He could banish the witch and her children, or he could banish himself along with them. The villagers said they would come back at first light to hear the father's decision.

The father was momentarily relieved. The villagers hadn't even mentioned burning his wife and daughters, or crushing them to death, or drowning them. His next thought was a less happy calculation. If he and his wife and children were banished, they would all starve. No other village would take his family in, and the father would have no means to feed them all through the winter—not without his farm. It would be a slower death than burning, but more painful in its own way.

After the villagers left, the father told his wife that there was only one thing to do. She and the girls should leave. They should make for the fforest, which was said to be haunted by old, unholy things. The father didn't believe in such nonsense, but his neighbors did. Which meant that no angry villagers would dare follow his wife and girls. The father reassured the mother that in a few short days he would come find his family. Then he would build them a shelter, and he would visit them regularly after that, bringing them food and firewood until it

was safe for his wife and children to come back home. With luck, he said to her, the rain would arrive long before the first frost. The villagers would realize their mistake, and all would be forgotten.

At dawn the next morning, the villagers watched as the father led his wife and daughters to the edge of the great wilderness. The mother's shoulders were bent, strapped down with as much food and clothing as she could carry, along with a sharp knife and an axe. She had to leave all her chickens behind, but she led one she-goat by a long rope. The father dared not kiss his wife or embrace his children. He turned his back when the mother and girls entered the forest. A villager gasped and swore later that the mother, twins, and goat had vanished before her very eyes.

The forest was very dark.

The mother spent those first few days and nights in a quiet state of panic. The girls were remarkably solemn and compliant for toddlers and seemed to sense that now wasn't the time for crying or pleading. The mother found a dry cave, and she built a fire, and she never closed her eyes while the sun was down. The girls slept through the howling of the wolves. The goat did not.

On the fifth day the father came, just when the mother had given up hope. He found them by the smoke of their fire. Weighed down with nails and supplies, he built them a drafty shack at the mouth of the cave. Then he told his wife that he had to return to the farm.

The mother kept the goat inside the little shack with her

and her daughters for fear the wolves might get to it otherwise. The goat gave them milk and kept the girls warm at night while their mother stared at the door waiting for her husband to come take them home.

At first the father came once a week. Then he came once a month. Each time he visited, the mother asked, "When can we come home?" But even after the first rains came and the drought was over, the father said it wasn't safe, that the villagers hadn't forgotten, that he'd heard of a witch being burned in the next village. When the mother said, "But I'm not a witch," the father nodded and looked away.

The girls had seen their fifth winter when their father stopped coming for good. They lived on sinewy game and goat's milk, and their mother muttered aloud that she feared what would happen to them if they couldn't feed the goat. She had a measuring look on her face when she said it. The girls held tight to the goat. They would starve sooner than eat their goat, they said.

The mother had long since stopped staring at the door waiting for her husband to come. For some time now when he did come it had been only to leave them supplies. He didn't touch his wife or look at the children. When he stopped coming altogether, the mother wondered if he were dead. But she thought not.

One cold morning, under a steel gray sky, the mother closed the goat up in the shack and led her daughters wordlessly through the forest. None of them had walked this way in years, but they knew the path by heart. It was late afternoon, the sky

already darkening, when they arrived at the back door of the farm that had been their home. The mother knocked, and a stout, ruddy-faced woman answered the door and sucked in her breath. Then the father came to the door. Surprise, then shame registered on his face. He placed his hand on the ruddy woman's shoulder. This told the mother all she had suspected. She was no longer a wife, and her husband was no longer her husband.

The girls had grown wild over the years, and they felt nothing more than curiosity as they stood in the warm, fire-lit doorway of their father's home. Then a scent of stewing meat met their noses and their mouths watered. The memory of that smell followed them all the way back to their cold shack, and food never tasted the same to them again. The warm goat's milk, the trout they caught in a cold silver stream, the stringy rabbit they cooked over the fire until it was crusty black in some spots and blood red in others—none of it filled their bellies. A gnawing, unsatisfied sensation curled and slithered in their stomachs even when they were full, even once the memory of that stew faded and they could no longer conjure the scent of food cooked in a real kitchen.

As the girls grew tall and strong and restless, their mother diminished. Each year they spent in the forest bent her shoulders and clouded her eyes. While the girls skittered across mountainsides, climbed trees, and caught fish in their bare hands, their mother sat in the dark, damp shack. Then she started to cough. Then she no longer sat, but lay on her side. Her breath rattled in her throat, and her skin thinned to transparency.

Over the years the girls had less and less to do with their mother and more to do with each other and the forest, but still it came as a shock to them when they returned to the shack one evening to find their mother dead. The goat lay beside her, and looked up when the girls entered, their black hair brown with mud. The girls looked at each other uncertainly, and some vague memory of civilization told them they needed to bury their mother. Long into the night, they dug a hole deep. The wolves howled and the sisters heard the rustling of leaves. The older sister hissed between her teeth and they both heard the rumble of a low growl in response. But the wolves came no closer.

The girls lived on alone. The goat curled up next to them at night as always, and sometimes when it nudged their faces in the morning, it brought back memories of their mother, and how she'd stroked their hair and kissed them. The vague dissatisfaction in their bellies soured into bitterness.

One day the girls found themselves walking toward the village. They were past needing to speak to each other. When the older sister set foot in the direction of their father's farm, the younger sister followed without question. They waited until dark, until long after their father had made his final check on the animals, and was fast asleep beside his wife in their warm house. Then the girls crept in and opened the barn doors wide and unlocked the chicken coop. They let the wolves do the rest. Soon there was nothing left of their father's livestock, just feathers and bones.

But that wasn't enough to satisfy the girls' bitterness. So

they turned to the other villagers' farms, and in one night of creeping and crawling, they unlatched all of their barn doors, and opened all of their coops. Then the girls perched themselves in the trees and listened to the feasting of the wolves.

When the village grew quiet again, the girls withdrew to their forest home. In the hours before dawn, they lay wakeful, eyes unwilling to close. Something happened in the girls in those hours. It was an opening up of one thing, and a closing of another.

The next morning, the girls smelled a whiff of fear in the air. It filled their bellies and made them feel warm in a way they couldn't remember since some dim, fairy-tale time when they'd been toddlers who slept in beds. They decided it was time to visit their father.

The sun was just about to dip below the horizon when they moved through their father's fields looking for him. Dirt and leaves had become as much a part of them as their own skin and hair, and they were near enough to touch their father before his eyes widened in alarm, and he saw them standing there, two women made of earth. At the moment he gasped, open-mouthed, the older sister breathed in his terror, and the hair on her arms lifted with the pleasure of it. The father's hands scabbled across his chest as if urgently looking for something he'd lost, and then he fell backward, dead, into his own field.

The younger sister touched her right hand to her sister's face. The older sister's eyes had gone black for just a moment. Then they paled to gray again.

The older sister reached for the younger sister's hand and

together they went to see the ruddy-faced woman. The younger sister knocked, and the ruddy-faced woman answered the door. Her fear gave off a sharp odor, like spoiled milk. The younger sister saw the woman's simple mind and her meager soul spread out before her as if on a table, just inviting her to eat it up. So the younger sister did. She inhaled the woman's fearful soul like it was a warm supper. The woman did as her husband had—her hands clutched her chest as if something precious had been yanked from it, and then she fell dead onto her kitchen floor. The girl glanced down at the ruddy-faced woman's body, and she felt a barely satisfied hunger. The sisters returned home and their hunger grew.

The next day, the sisters waited until night fell thick and black, and then they returned.

As they neared the village, the girls were surprised to find another girl—a child, really—standing in a field of darkness as if she were waiting for them. This girl wasn't like their father or the ruddy-faced woman. There was no fear in this child when she looked upon the sisters. She looked at them only with interest. Curiosity. The girl aroused a memory in the sisters, a memory of being a child in this village once. And so the sisters decided to leave this child unclaimed—to leave all the children. It was the frightened adults—the ones who accused, the ones who banished, anyone older than the sisters were themselves—that the sisters would seek out. They were the ones whose fear the sisters could smell like smoke in the air. In a way, the sisters would ease their fear. They would take it all away.

The sisters continued on, visiting every home in the village.

Leaving the children sleeping in their beds, and the adults dead and hollowed out in their own. And so the sisters stole what should not have been stolen, and left only a hole, an absence, in the place of what had been ripped away. It was a dark little hole at first, one that would spread in the coming years. Soul by soul it would grow. But the sisters knew nothing of this.

Finally, they were satisfied. The moon sank low in the sky, the stars dimmed, and they walked home to their shack in the wilderness through silver leaves, their feet grazing the forest floor as if they were being held just aloft.

As they neared the shack, the sisters smelled blood, and pain and fear as well, but this wasn't pleasant to their noses and their footsteps quickened. The door to the shack was agape. Perhaps the old goat had nudged it open in the night. The goat's blood pooled thickly just in the spot where she had often lain on sunny days. The wolves had dragged the rest of her away.

The older sister felt nothing. The younger sister had the glimmer of a memory of something called sadness, but it floated just out of her reach. They were girls no longer, nor were they women. They had become something else. They found that they had little need of food and water anymore. There were so many frightened, uncertain souls in the world just waiting to be eaten up. And all the girls had to do was breathe them in.

Their names were Angelica and Benedicta. And they were the soul eaters.

A decorative border of leafy branches frames the page. The branches are detailed with small leaves and are positioned on the left and right sides, curving slightly towards the center.

PART

ONE

When it's dark

ONE

Nights were long for Alys.

And they were always the same. Her mother washed her and dropped her flannel nightshift over her head. She tucked Alys between linen sheets and under wool blankets that felt heavy on Alys's restless limbs. Then came Alys's night-long entrapment by darkness and quiet and the absence of sleep.

Alys looked longingly after Mam as she left the room. Mam turned back once and smiled at Alys, then closed the door behind her, snuffing the glow of light from the warm kitchen. Alys imagined her father sitting out there, pipe in mouth, toes near the fire. Then she lay in bed listening to the sounds of the house fall around her—the low murmur of her parents, the clattering of a dish, the footsteps on wood floors.

Then silence.

She could hear them breathing. Mam's soft sighs, Dad's snores, a moan.

Alys was seven now, and she'd been this way for as long as she could remember. She dreaded the night.

If only she were allowed to get out of bed. It was the knowing that she couldn't get out, that was what made sleeping so impossible for her. Told to lie still and sleep, Alys felt the strongest urge to do exactly otherwise. Her eyes instead flew open and stayed that way. She had no siblings so she couldn't know this for sure, but she'd been told that she was an odd child this way, that most children knew to give in to sleep when the time came. Alys could not do this.

Alys decided that this night would be different. This night, when the sighs and the snoring rose in the air, she would declare an end to her nights of entrapment. She would make the night her own.

She waited long after silence fell, just to be sure. Then she dropped her feet to the cold wood floor. It was end of summer, near harvest, and although the days were still warm, already she sniffed autumn in the air. She found her woolen stockings and boots, a wool overdress. She was not a child who needed to be told what to wear. Mam always told Alys that she was sensible that way.

Alys wasn't being sensible now. This wasn't the wisest night for her to wander. She knew this, and yet she couldn't stop herself. She'd made a plan, and after so much waiting, after such a long imprisonment, she refused to wait another night. She couldn't wait. She wouldn't. Not even after what had happened

last night with the farmer and his wife, nor the night before that, when the wolves came and ate up all the chickens, and goats, and horses in the entire village of Gwenith. Alys was sad about Mam's chickens. They were so sweet and warm in her lap, and they laid such nice eggs.

Alys had heard her parents talk about the farmer and his wife, the ones who were dead. They lived way out on the edge of the village, nearly to the fforest. Mam had said the only reason they were found at all is that someone thought the farmer might know what had happened to all the animals. Mam said that surely all that bloodshed was the work of a witch, and that was where the other witch and her twin girls had lived. And then Dad said that just because you had married one witch, didn't mean you had married another. Mam disagreed, and said she supposed it did mean that very thing, because then why else was the farmer dead? And weren't Mam's own dead chickens proof they were all being punished for that man's sins and whatever he and his wife had been getting up to out there where no one could see them? Then Dad had given Mam a look, and Mam realized that Alys was listening, and well . . . that was the end of that.

Alys should have been afraid of the wolves and the idea of a witch being married to a farmer, but she wasn't. Alys, in fact, had never been afraid. Her favorite nursery rhymes were the scary ones. The ones about The Beast sucking out your soul and leaving behind nothing but gristle and skin. Those were the ones Alys liked best. When her friend Gaenor squealed and shut her eyes and clapped her hands over her ears, Alys just

laughed and kept singing. Sometimes she'd promise Gaenor she'd stop, and just at the moment Gaenor trusted Alys enough to drop her hands from her ears and open her eyes again, Alys would continue:

*The Beast, It will peek in on you
When you're fast asleep
Open up
Invite It in
And oh your Mam will weep*

Alys stepped out of her room, listened again for Mam and Dad's breathing. Then she was through the kitchen and out the kitchen door before she could think twice or change her mind.

The air was chill and moist and open around her. And the sky, oh the sky. It was awash in stars.

Alys looked up at the sky, felt lifted up by it. She turned to see how it might look different, to catch parts of it that she couldn't bend her head back far enough to see. It was lovely to be so free, everyone in the village asleep, and Alys not even trying to sleep. If she could spend every night this way, Alys thought to herself, she'd have no reason to dread it anymore.

Standing in Mam and Dad's kitchen yard, Alys began to feel hemmed in again. She could sense the house rising up behind her, the coop and the barn on either side of her. And she knew that through the darkness rose their neighbors' houses. What Alys wanted was a fallow field—a stretch of tall grass that she could feel spreading out all around her as far as her eye could

see through the dark. And Alys knew where just such a field lay. She only had to get herself to the road, follow it out of the village, and there it was, big and wide and bordered only by forest that was even bigger and wider than the field.

Her legs carried her through the dark. She held her arms out to either side, felt the night air float over and around her. She was alone but not lonely.

Then the field. In she walked, feeling the long grass brush her skirts, scratch and tickle even through her stockings. No longer could she feel any kind of structure around her. When she reached the center of the field, she looked up again at the stars. The sky was an endless bowl tipped over, the stars pouring down on her like grains of light. She opened her eyes wide to take them in.

She felt them before she saw them—the women.

It wasn't that they made a sound. It was more the way they didn't make a sound that attracted Alys's notice, the sense of a presence without bodies attached. But they did have bodies, she saw. These women. These women made of mud and leaves. They floated through the grass and they saw Alys with their wide gray eyes that glowed even in the night, as if they were lit from within.

And still Alys wasn't afraid. Curious, yes. Alys had never seen women like these before. They weren't village women—at least not from any village that Alys had ever heard of. They didn't even look like travelers. Travelers were odd-looking sorts, but these women were odder. They looked, it occurred to Alys, more like trees than women.

And then they were near her, next to her, standing either side of her and each resting a hand of mud and clay on her shoulders. They were slim, and although they were much taller than she, Alys realized that they weren't women at all. They were still girls. Older than Alys, but maybe not so much older. Not mothers, certainly.

"What is your name?" Only one of the girls said it, and yet it seemed like both of them did. Alys felt a kind of energy pass through her shoulders, a shivery thread connecting their hands.

"I'm Alys."

"Alys, go to sleep," the other said.

When the other said it, Alys felt an instant tug in her eyes, like a curtain being pulled. But no, Alys thought, that wasn't what she wanted. She sent the curtain flying up again, opened her eyes wider. "But I don't want to sleep," Alys said.

"There is no fear in this one, *Benedicta*." The girl sniffed the air around Alys. She had been sniffed by Gaenor's dog just like that.

"No, there is no fear, *Angelica*."

Benedicta. Angelica. Alys had never heard those names before. She thought they were beautiful. And there was something beautiful about these owl-eyed girls, their long dark hair tangled with branches and leaves.

Then they left her. Just as quickly as they came, the girls floated on. Out of the field and into the dark, disappearing at a point off in the distance that told Alys nothing about where they were going.

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