

SHE WAS A THIN RAKE OF A GIRL, no shape to her, never a smile. Her eyes were burning coals in a white face, as though no blood ran in her veins. Black hair chopped off at her ears, like an animal. No pretence at anything.

As a child, she would eat everything her mother put before her. Everywhere she went she ate what was offered. Everyone offered because she was so thin. "Eat up," they would say. "Eat up, Annie, or you'll fade away." She was a bottomless pit. She consumed unlimited amounts and never said a word. Annie was a silent girl who grew into a silent woman.

It was the priest who called her forth as the Sin Eater. "I have a feeling about the girl," he said. "Let her try it. She'll be hard pressed for a husband in Kellairne."

It was a bitter January day. First death of the new year. They led her into the front parlour where the corpse lay surrounded by food. There were china plates piled high with slices of tongue, pickled onions, and freshly baked bread. There was a steaming bowl of beef stew, more like a soup with the amount of beer added to it. There were dishes of applesauce, crystallized fruits, scones with fat, soft currants, butter, and cheeses. As well, there were all the remnants of food left in the larder at the time of the death. Annie sat on the wooden bench. Without so much as a glance at the body, she set to. It took her twenty-five minutes exactly to eat her way around the table. When all the dishes were clean, she stood. Without looking up, she left the cottage, stooping as she passed through the doorway. She was a tall girl, large-boned.

There were no ill effects, so she kept at it, eating the sins of the dead in Kellairne, year in, year out, season after season. And she only grew thinner.

\* \* \*

ANNIE LIVED WITH HER PARENTS in a stone cottage with a sod roof. She did her work silently and she ranged the moors like a wild animal. She knew every plant and wildflower. She knew many secrets. Some people said this was how she rid herself of the sins of the dead, with strange rituals out on the moors. Some said the fairies helped her. Others said she knew magic and medicine and ate poisonous plants to protect herself. But Annie kept her silence.

When her father died, she ate his sins and went on living in her tiny room in the cottage with her widowed mother. The old woman did not press the girl to

work in the house. She believed her daughter ranged the moors to save her soul and she did not want a damned child, so Annie was free. The sins of a generation passed through her, and she was untouched. Her soul was as virgin as her body. She lay in her narrow bed at night hugging her ribcage for comfort. She needed for nothing.

People wondered. People whispered. "What will happen when Annie's mother passes on? Will she eat her sins too? How will she manage alone?"

\* \* \*

AT FORTY, ANNIE BEGAN TO WASTE. She ate and ate and as she ate, she wasted before the eyes of the village. Before her mother, before the priest and the young curate, before the parishioners, before the undertaker, before the postmistress, the children, the teacher. Annie was dying, and who would eat her sins and the sins of the world? Why was she being consumed at forty? Was it the sins catching up with her finally?

By the end of the year she could barely walk. Her body was racked with cramps. Annie showed all the symptoms of starvation, but her eyes burned hotter than ever as she ate, with an urgency now, like an animal, gobbling and gulping, looking around nervously to see if anyone were close enough to steal her food. When she wasn't eating, Annie lay in her bed. She was too weak to roam the moors. She was too weak to walk across her room. Slowly, she starved to death with a full belly.

Her mother laid out the body. Annie looked like a girl again in death. Her small white face. Her thin body. And a peaceful look with her burning eyes shut. People came from miles around to join the villagers at Annie's wake. The table, with her body laid down the centre, was loaded with food. But no one would touch it. There wasn't a soul who would eat a crumb.