

The Woman in the Window

By Kathy Childs

I see her when I shut my eyes at night. She haunts me, follows me, will not let me rest. Her palms press against the window as if she is trying to push through but her forehead leans on the glass in a gesture of defeat. She conveys resignation; the weariness of a soul lost to time.

The woman in the window. I have searched the archives, delved into the history of this place to find her name, to ferret out the details of her past. The Abbotsford Convent, built in the 1860's, has a complex past and many of the records have been lost. At 11am on the morning following each full moon she appears at the window and looks out with dull, blank eyes. Her pale stricken face blurs in photographs regardless of the quality of my lens so today my sister Shirley has come with me. She is a portrait artist and an ally with a spiritual bent. If photographs do not give me clarity perhaps a sketch will. I hunger to know who she is. We sit on the lawn and wait. Watching. The gardens in front of the building are in full bloom – red, yellow and luscious shades of green. The facade of the building sits in shadow, gloomy and dim. The contrast is unnerving. The windows stand out in the dark grey walls, like bloodshot eyes edged in red brick. I look away and focus on the warmth of the sun on my shoulders. A butterfly settles on the lavender and I watch entranced at its dance on this fine autumn morning.

She has arrived. The chill of her stare draws my gaze. Shirley pulls out her sketchbook and her pencil skims over the page.

“Stay here.” I jump up and move quickly towards the building, my eyes glued to the window. I sprint up the outside stairs, push open the door and stop. The entrance

hall, usually well lit, is dark and shadowy. The bright modern art that decorates the walls is gone and in its place are woven wall hangings. I run my fingers along the coarse wool, tracing the embroidered pictures with my fingertips. The tapestries are magnificent, nuns and priests scurrying, eyes to the ground. Each wall hanging leads to another, telling a story, and as I climb the stairs to the landing I follow the narrative. I sense movement - the echo of a shuffle and I stop. Wait.

“Hello, is anyone there?” Silence. Just dust and memories. I glance back to the tapestry, stifle a scream. Eyes - malevolent, evil, boring into me. I shiver, rubbing my arms against the chill. My eyes remain on the tapestry, bound to it. The picture is gruesome, nuns and priests, their faces grotesque with horror, shrink before the creature. The need to bow, to acquiesce is strong. I resist. I continue to climb the stairs, to walk trance-like along the landing until I am standing at a door. Her door. I reach out to turn the handle, hesitate, and shake my head to clear the fog. My gaze falls on one last tapestry, a picture of a woman, and for the first time I see her face. My face.

Fear dispels the fog. I turn to run. The door stays with me, always in front of me as I spin. I tumble to the floor, tears coursing down my cheeks, my hands grasping my hair, pulling it; willing the pain to bring back reality.

“Help me.” Soft, beseeching.

Hunkered on the musty carpet, I hold my breath, listen.

“Help me.” A whisper. A plea.

I free my hands from my hair, push myself upright. All I have to do is to grasp the old brass knob, turn it and open the door. The need to help her is overwhelming.

“I have waited so long. You are the only one who can free me.”

I stand on trembling legs and reach for the doorknob. The metal is surprisingly

warm, comforting. I turn the knob and push the door in, but remain in the hallway.

She stands at the window, her back to me.

“You came. Thank you.”

“What can I do?”

“Touch the window. The curse will be broken and I will be free.”

“Curse?”

“He tricked me. Gained my trust, ensnared me. I can only be released by one of my blood.”

“What happens when I touch the window?”

“I am released.”

“That’s all I need to do?”

“That is all. Blood drawn to blood through time.”

I move into the room. Wary. Through the window I see Shirley crouched on the lawn in the sun, her pencil busy on the paper. I watch as she looks at her sketch, then to the window and back to her sketch again. She jumps up, her pad and pencil tumbling from her lap. She races towards the building. I lean in to see what has caused her panic. Stumble. Put out my hand to stop myself falling. As my hand touches the icy window I know I have made an awful mistake.

“Thank you.” Her voice is kind. “You have saved me.”

“I can’t move. Why can’t I move?” As hard as I try I am unable to wrench my hand from the window.

“In time blood will be drawn to blood and you too will be freed.”

“No.” I try to peel off my hand, to lift a finger. “You can’t do this.” I strain to shift my feet, to pivot. No movement.

“You can’t leave me here. Not like this.”

"I am sorry but it has been so long."

"How long?" I hold my breath, wondering if it is better not to know.

"203 years, 45 days." She reaches out and brushes my hair back off my face. I feel nothing. "You get used to it after a while." And then like an echo of the past she fades away and I am alone.

I try to move, to tear my hand from the window, anticipating the pain as the skin peels away, craving it. Nothing. I am a statute cast in flesh. I let loose a scream full of fury and hate.

"Charmaine?"

"Shirley. Help me." My voice is high pitched, panicked.

In the reflection I see Shirley as she pauses outside the door. "Are you okay?"

"Look." I call to Shirley. "Out the window. See."

She leans on the glass as she peers to the garden below. "I can't see anything."

I move back from the window, holding up my free hand, turning it over, marvelling at the movement that I have always taken for granted. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what." She goes to turn and finds her hands are fixed firmly to the glass.

"What have you done?"

"I'm sorry. Really I am."

"My God. You traded places with her and now you've sacrificed me." Her voice is incredulous. "I came to warn you. The face in the window changed, it was you."

"And now it's you." I slump down onto the floor and lean against the wall. "You have to understand Shirley, I couldn't do it. Couldn't stay here. Not for a whole month."

"And what about me? My God, how long was she here?"

"It's only for a short time. Blood calls to blood. We only need someone in the family

to come to free you.”

Shirley looks confused and then her face clears. “Patsy. Can we pull it off?” She pauses. “But I’ll be here a whole month.”

“You won’t actually be here again until the third of June, after the next full moon.” I attempt a smile. Remembering the woman, recalling that she had counted each and every day; 203 years and 45 days.

“I’ll bring her up, we’ll make the switch.” I rise, anxious to be gone.

“Can you just brush the hair out of my eyes before you go, it’ll drive me mad.”

I reach over and gently brush her hair back behind her ear. I kiss her tenderly on the cheek. “Till June.”

But Shirley was not bound as I had been; she was my half sister, half bound by blood. She kicked the back of my knee and I stumbled, my hands reaching automatically for the glass to break my fall.

“Really. You fell for that. I would have thought better of you.”

I try to move, my hands once again glued to the glass but I am stuck, immobile.

“Sorry sis, but I don’t trust you. You would have left me here.”

“No I wouldn’t, I would have bought Patsy. I promise.”

“Your promises haven’t been worth much in the past so you’ll have to excuse me if I don’t take your word for it.”

“But you’ll bring Patsy.”

“Only time will tell.” Shirley turns to leave and I hear her shutting the door firmly behind her.