

Blind Faith

Dena Raposa

"It won't be forever, Samuel."

"Liar."

He could hear the rustling of Mary's skirts from somewhere behind him, and the scraping sound of a curtain being pulled back. The room smelled clean and un-lived-in, the stiff scent of starch clinging to the bedclothes, the window curtains, the heavy apron Mary wore. So different from the battlefields he'd recently returned from.

"Samuel..." Mary's cool, thin fingers brushed against the side of his neck, and Samuel jumped, startled.

"Don't do that," he growled, and the fingers vanished.

"I didn't mean to startle you." The teasing tone in her voice set his teeth on edge, and he jerked away, crossing clumsily to the window. "It doesn't matter." But it did.

"What's wrong with you?" Mary wasn't laughing anymore. Her voice was reproachful. Reasonable, even. Reasonable!

"What's wrong with me?" he repeated, turning toward the sound of his voice. "What's wrong with you? There are men out there, Mary. They're fighting. And they're dying. I know what the papers say. That they're heroes, that somehow what they do is noble. But it isn't. It's horrible, and pointless. And you can't see that, can you?" She didn't answer, so he said it again, more forcefully, almost shouting. "Can you, Mary?"

"Of course I do," Mary said softly. Samuel snorted and turned away. "But you've escaped all that now. The Great War can go on without you. You're home again."

"Not all of me," Samuel said. "I left part of me on the battlefield."

"Doctor Miller said your sight could come back," Mary said gently. Samuel could hear her tiny feet padding across the floor toward him, so he was tensed but not surprised when she reached out and took his hand in hers. "And even if it doesn't, I'll be here to take care of you. Forever."

"You would trap me here," said Samuel. "In my father's empty country house, hours from London, cut off from the city and every part of my life."

"How can you say that?" Mary demanded. "You could have a life here... with me..." She moved closer to him, until Samuel could feel the heavy fabric of her skirts press against his trousers. "Before you left to fight in the war, we planned to marry."

"No," Samuel said. "You planned to marry me."

She gasped, and wrenched her hand back. A moment later, Samuel heard the angry patter of her feet running out of the room and down the corridor. He listened to her go, his heart oddly light. Mary and he had been close as children, in the years before the war. Back in those days, Samuel had seen these lands, his father's country es-

tate, as an Eden of sorts. It was an escape from the noise and smell of the city, from his mother's constant illnesses, and his father's cold stares. Every summer, twelve weeks out of the year, was spent in this house. They were the best memories he had.

And there had always been Mary.

She was the gardener's daughter, delicate and charming, always interested in everything he did or said. When Samuel was a child, he thought that made him interesting. Now he knew better. War had taught him better. He wasn't the person Mary had built him up to be—he was nothing very special at all. And while once he had considered wedding himself to Mary, he now knew he hadn't loved her at all. Only the version of himself he saw reflected in her admiring eyes.

"You always were terrible with women."

"Who's there?" Samuel demanded. He would have sworn he was alone in the room since Mary had gone running out. He tensed. The ever-present darkness made him paranoid—it was impossible to tell when he might run into something, or when some unknown assailant might come for him.

But that was the war talking, and Samuel knew it. He made an effort to calm himself, and failed miserably. He felt naked without a weapon, but Doctor Miller had ordered him disarmed until he 'reacquainted himself with life at peace.'

"Just me."

It was a woman's voice, lower than Mary's but younger than the house's cook's, who had been with the estate since Samuel's father was young. And as far as Samuel knew there were no other women in the house.

"Who?"

"You sound like an owl."

"Wh... what?" This conversation was not going at all in a direction he felt comfortable with. "An... owl?"

"Because owls say—ah, never mind." The mystery woman gave a deep sigh. "Don't worry about me. Worry about you."

Cautiously, Samuel began to work his way across the room, following the sound of her voice. "What should I be worrying about?" he asked, to get her talking again.

"Here." Two calloused hands grasped at Samuel's forearms, pulled them forward. "I can't watch you stumble around like a blind man. It's too sad."

"I am a blind man," Samuel answered.

"And I'm a dead woman. Let's not focus on labels."

"You're—wait, what?"

"Dead," she repeated, voice completely serious. "But that's what happens when you're convicted of witchcraft and burned at the stake."

"Witchcraft?" Samuel laughed, sure now that she was putting him on.

"Completely untrue, I promise. And it was a few hundred years ago anyway so

it's not like it really matters."

Samuel stopped laughing abruptly, suddenly confused. He wasn't sure where this joke was going. "You're crazy," he said, a little tentatively. She still might just be teasing him, which would actually be nice. Ever since the battle where he had lost his sight, everyone had walked on eggshells around him. It was enough to drive a man mad.

"Dead, actually." Her voice faded, and the hands that held Samuel's suddenly seemed a lot less solid. "But close enough..."

And just like that, she had gone, leaving Samuel utterly alone and suddenly uncertain. He spent that night in his room, refusing to see anyone, thinking it all over. He spent the next day alone because he just wasn't ready to leave. And the day after that, because he kept imagining the stares everyone else would give him, stares he wouldn't even be able to see. Slowly, without noticing, he slipped into brooding.

The next day, the ghost came back.

The first he knew of it was when her incredulous voice demanded, "Are you moping?"

He had been, actually, lying face down on his bed, limbs splayed out around him like a dying starfish. But he would never admit it. He had that much pride left, at least. "No," he said, scrambling suddenly to his feet. "Listen." He'd been thinking about her a lot in his days alone. More than he would have liked to admit. "You can't just say you're a convicted witch and you've been dead for centuries and then just leave without a proper explanation!"

There was no response for several long moments. Samuel stood motionless in the middle of the room, listening with all his might, hoping to God he hadn't scared her off again, wishing he still had his vision, so he could just see if she was there or not.

"It wouldn't help anyway."

Samuel jumped, trying to ignore the way she snickered in response. She was so close behind him that he could feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. "What wouldn't help?"

"Even if you could see, you wouldn't see me."

He shook his head, wondering how she'd even known he was thinking that. "Why not?"

She stepped around him, and Samuel had the strangest feeling that she was scrutinizing his face. She smelled of autumn, of falling leaves and bitter winds.

"I told you. I'm dead."

"So what does that mean?" Samuel demanded. "Are you a ghost?"

"No."

"Then... what are you?"

"Anna." She poked him lightly, almost playfully, in the side. "It's my name, in

case you were wondering. Which you weren't."

Years of lessons in manners and chivalry came to his aid. "My apologies, Anna."

"Sure," she said. "And no. I'm not a ghost. More like an... echo. Something you hear, not something you see."

"And is that because you're a witch?" Samuel sat down on the bed, and a moment later he felt it dip as Anna sat down next to him.

"I told you," she said. "I was falsely accused. I'm not a witch."

"Then why are you a gho—an echo?" Samuel asked. "There has to be some reason you're special."

"Special?" Anna repeated. "Well I don't know about that. It might not be me. It might be something that happens to everyone, and we're all just on different frequencies."

"Different what?"

"Or maybe it's you," Anna went on, apparently not listening.

"Me?" Samuel laughed. "I highly doubt that."

"No one else has ever been able to hear me," Anna said. "And I have been around for a long time. But... well, the odd thing is that I was here when you were young, too. You never heard me then." Suddenly her fingers were on his face, hesitant, almost asking for permission. "Maybe it's because you've been blinded. You can't see, so you're learning to listen."

"Or maybe you're just a hallucination," Samuel said. "I've seen soldiers go mad before."

Her fingers dropped away, and for a moment Samuel thought she might have been wounded by his words. Then she took his hands in hers. "Do I feel like a hallucination?" Her tone was one of honest curiosity.

"I'm not sure," Samuel admitted. "I've never met one before."

"Well," said Anna. "I'll have to think on that."

And for a second time, she vanished.

The next morning, Mary brought a visitor in to see him.

"Samuel?" she called from the doorway. "There's someone here for you."

"Dr. Miller." Samuel had been at his desk, staring sightlessly out the open window, but now he rose to his feet. "Always a pleasure."

"The pleasure is mine." Dr. Miller stepped forward, his footfalls heavy even on the floor's thick carpet, and grasped Samuel's outstretched hand. "But... ah, if you don't mind, how did you know it was me?"

In truth, it had been the doctor's smell—clean, almost too clean. "You have been my doctor since I was young. Of course I know you."

"Ah. Well, in any case, your fiancée asked me to see you. She said you have been depressed over the loss of your sight."

"Fiancée, she said?" Samuel murmured. "Well, I won't say this has been a pleasant experience for me, but it hasn't been... entirely bad."

"How so?" The doctor's tone was dubious.

He had been thinking of Anna. "Ah. My... other senses, for one," he improvised. No point mentioning her. Not when Samuel couldn't decide for himself if Anna was real or a hallucination.

"Well. In any case." Samuel heard Dr. Miller deposit his case onto the desk, and a moment later felt the doctor's calloused hands grasp his elbow. "I need to examine your eyes to see how they're healing."

"Alright."

Samuel allowed Dr. Miller to guide him onto the bed, then sat perfectly still as the doctor unwound the bandage from his eyes with quick, sure movements. As each layer came off, Samuel caught himself straining to see, but there was nothing, only vague impressions of light and shadow.

"Well," Dr. Miller said finally. "You seem to be healing well."

They were the last words Samuel had expected to hear. Or so he thought, until the doctor continued—

"In fact, I think your vision should be practically restored within a few weeks. At least enough to allow you to function normally."

It was an outcome Samuel had not dared hope for, and Samuel couldn't quite stop himself from smiling at the news. Then he thought again of Anna, and the smile turned to ice.

Dr. Miller went on speaking, but Samuel was no longer listening. He heard Mary give some reply, and before long Dr. Miller had replaced the old bandages with new ones, said his goodbyes, and gone on his way. Mary escorted him decorously out of the house, but as soon as the doctor was gone, Samuel heard her pounding feet on the stairs. Then she was back in the room, throwing herself into his less than welcoming arms.

"Samuel!" Her upturned face was only a breath away, and Samuel could smell the tears on it. "Such wonderful news!"

And for some reason, all he could think of to say was—"You told Dr. Miller that you and I are betrothed."

"Of course I did," said Mary. She pulled back from him a little.

"But we're not."

"Not officially," Mary agreed.

"Not at all," Samuel corrected.

Mary didn't answer at first, and when she did, her words came hesitantly. "But before you left, you said we would marry. That we would run away if we had to, because your father didn't approve. But he does now. He sent me a letter last week, he

said so, and don't you see—"

"No."

"I didn't actually mean... not 'see' see. I just meant—as a figure of speech."

"What?" Behind his bandages, Samuel blinked in confusion. "No, I mean, you're not looking at this the right way. My father has no love for you, and little for me. He wants an excuse to disinherit me now that I've come home crippled. If I were to marry a servant's daughter, no one would question his actions."

"But if we love each other... it won't matter."

"I don't love you." The words came out more harshly than Samuel had intended, but he felt no regret. There are times when cruelty can be the only possible kindness.

"But I thought..." Mary trailed off, suddenly uncertain.

"So did I," Samuel answered, this time making an effort to keep his voice kinder. "But I was wrong. Now I know—I only ever loved the way you loved me."

She started to say something, but cut herself short. "I have... tasks in the kitchen to see to," she said, and left the room before Samuel could call her back, if he even wanted to.

He groaned and fell back on his bed. For several minutes he lay there in his own misery, until he heard the voice he had been waiting for.

"Smooth move there, Sammy."

"Anna!"

"In the flesh. Ish." Her voice was colder than the other times they had spoken.

"What's the matter?"

"You."

Utterly mystified, Samuel crossed the room until his reaching hands brushed against her shoulder, stiff and unyielding. Closed off. Cold. "What did I do?"

"Nothing, yet. But you're going to leave me, all on my own. I've had enough of that for one afterlife." It took Samuel a second to connect her words with Dr. Miller's earlier visit, but the moment he did, Anna said, "That's it. You got there."

"Would you stop reading my mind?" Samuel snapped.

"I'm not."

"I thought you said you were a witch," Samuel said. "What kind of witch can't even read minds?"

"I said 'falsely accused,'" Anna corrected. "I don't read minds. Just faces. And yours is an open book."

Samuel could only sputter in response, which at least seemed to put Anna in a better mood. She laughed, and the atmosphere of the room seemed to warm slightly.

"Alright," she said. "I'm sorry. But... Samuel, I've been on my own for a long time, and if your sight comes back, I'll probably be alone again. I'd rather that not happen."

"Am I really the first one you've been able to talk to?" Samuel asked.

"In two centuries," Anna said. "Yes. And I know it's the blindness, because I've been here for centuries. I was here when you were young, and came down here every summer. You never heard me then. And now you can. You..." She hesitated. "You interest me."

The words sent a sudden rush of unexpected warmth through Samuel. "Anna..." He hesitated, then plunged on anyway. "You are an enigma to me as well. And, while your words can be caustic—"

"Is this supposed to be an apology?"

"And at times downright uncivilized—" Samuel spoke right over Anna, who punched his shoulder playfully in response. "I will admit that I look forward to our conversations."

"Have you?" Anna sounded surprised.

"I have."

"Then... can I ask a favor of you?"

"Of course."

"Someday soon," Anna said quietly. "Your doctor friend will come back, and tell you it's time to take the bandage off. I won't ask you not to do it. It's too much when you only met me a week ago. So I'll say this instead. If you do take the bandages off, if you do choose to regain your sight—do it because you want to. Not because of anyone else. And know that if you do—we will never be able to speak again."

"Alright," Samuel said. "I can promise that."

And Anna vanished.

Samuel spent a lot of time over the next few days thinking it over. Two futures stretched out ahead of him. In one, he lived alone and sightless in this country house, far removed from his old life in London. But there would always be Anna, and she was a woman he would dearly love to grow closer to.

Down the other path lay a life lived as his father's rightful heir, rich and proud and powerful. It would be foolish to give it all up for a woman. For a woman he barely knew, who might be nothing but a product of his battle-scarred mind. Logically, he could not give up everything for her.

And yet, Samuel wanted nothing more. He knew what life would be like if he accepted his vision back. Years and decades of political and social maneuvering, always plotting to improve his standing and thus please his father. With Anna, suddenly none of that mattered, and a whole new world of possibilities opened up before him. He had no idea what that path offered, but the mystery was intoxicating.

So, the next time Dr. Miller came to visit, accompanied again by Mary (still much subdued after their recent fight), Samuel announced that he had no desire to see again. He went on for several minutes, giving nonsensical reasons for his choice, trying to explain the unexplainable.

Both Mary and Dr. Miller did him the courtesy of listening silently until at last, Samuel tired himself out. Then Dr. Miller said, "But Samuel, you have no choice in the matter."

"Of course I do," Samuel said stiffly.

"Your father has given me instructions," Dr. Miller said quietly, guiding Samuel to a chair. "Your bandages are coming off."

Samuel didn't answer right away, too busy at war with himself to give voice to any of it. Then he jumped, as a quiet voice called his name. He jumped slightly, but neither Mary nor Dr. Miller reacted at all, and a moment later Samuel recognized Anna's voice.

"You promised," Anna said, the slightest note of accusation in her tone. "You promised this would be your choice."

"I—" He wanted to tell Dr. Miller that he didn't care what his father thought, but that was untrue. For all of his life he had been dominated, completely and utterly, by his father's presence. And now, he couldn't even bring himself to protest as he felt the doctor, gently but firmly, reach out and unwrap the bandages.

The room was silent, until the last layer came away, and Samuel heard Anna's quiet voice. "So you lied."

"No—" Samuel half rose, turning toward her voice. For a moment as his much-abused eyes struggled to adjust to sight, he thought he saw the shape of a woman outlined in the light that blazed in through the room's open window.

Then Dr. Miller clapped him on the back, clearly relieved that his patient had recovered so well, and Samuel jerked forward. By the time he looked back, the woman's shape had vanished. And that was the last he ever saw of, or heard from, Anna.

In time, he came to believe she had never existed at all. It had been a difficult time. He had been depressed, unhappy, ready to believe in any half-baked story his troubled mind could concoct. And besides, if she had never actually been real, he hadn't actually lost anything.

He eventually apologized to Mary, and—in a semi-rebellious act that deep down Samuel knew was too little, too late—married her. His father, to Samuel's extreme disappointment, never said a word against the union, which was probably the worst thing he could have done. And Samuel knew it.

Later, they had children: two healthy boys, followed by a beautiful girl. And then came their fourth child, Jonathon, who was born early and sickly and small.

And blind.

He lived to see his first birthday, despite Dr. Miller's grim predictions to the contrary, and slowly began to grow healthy. But during that first year, Samuel spent a lot of nights sitting up with his youngest son, as though his silent vigils could somehow

make his son well.

And sometimes, in that dark, still time that comes just after midnight, there seemed to be someone else in the room, someone Samuel could only ever catch a glimpse of from the corner of his eye. Sometimes, he thought of Anna.

And he wondered.