Keeper Of The Fields

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The door creaked as Meg walked into her house.

"That you, Dear?" came her mother's voice from somewhere near the kitchen.

"Yes, Mum, I'm home."

"Come into the kitchen will you?"

Meg shouted an affirmative and set her school things in her room, stalling for time. Finally she went to the kitchen.

Her mother was standing at the table, up to her elbows in bread dough. "Where were you, Pet?" she asked.

Meg sighed. Should she answer truthfully? Of course. This was, after all, her mother; she really didn't have a choice. "I was walking in the fields, Mum."

Her mother reacted just like she knew she would, negatively, with her Irish temper suddenly in full swing.

"Don't know why" — slap went the dough — "You have to go to that dangerous" — slap — "place all the time!" Meg watched as her mother turned slightly red, because she didn't stop the tirade long enough to get a good breath of air. After a few more slaps with the dough her mother turned to face her and started all over again.

"You are too young to be trotting around those fields like some young colt let loose! An' what's going to happen when one day you fall in a bog so deep we'll'a not even find you again?"

"Mother, I know those fields like the back of my hand. I don't get lost and I'm old enough to take care of myself!"

Mother and daughter stood staring at each other, neither willing to give in. Meg sighed inwardly. Why did it always have to be like this? She had always been a smart girl, in the top of her class, but academic prowess never got her far with her mother. Meg could never really understand what the big deal about the fields was. There weren't very many natural dangers if you kept your eyes open. She had always heard the talk of something living in the fields but no one really knew what it was. She had always thought it was a tale to keep young children out of the fields but that didn't explain why the adults were scared. Maybe she'd ask her "Da" or maybe the Vicar.

The villagers, it seemed to Meg, regarded her as an oddity. She often heard them talking about her, her preference for the fields and the animals in it to some kind of social life. Olan, the village butcher, would comment on her strangeness, saying, "She moves like a graceful young deer. She don't have any of the awkwardness of the other young girls had; strange at her age."
"Well," sighed her mother, "I suppose I can't very well lock you up, seeing as you're almost a young woman. But," and she waved a finger to emphasize her point, "you mind me girl, there's queer things about them fields and none in the village 'll deny it! Don't you be there past dusk, hear?"

Meg smiled; it seemed her mother was startled at the happiness and relief in her daughter's face. "Why" she said, "I do believe you care for the place."

"Mum, thank you so much! I'll do everything you said — promise!"

"Right, then how about givin' me a hand with these loaves?"

As the two pounded and rolled the dough together Meg's thoughts turned towards the fields. What was it about them that fascinated her so? Their dark beauty? The way the sun slanted on the grasses? The small creatures she had befriended? She had been exploring the fields for as long as she could remember. It was a wonderful place to be by herself. It was dangerous, she'd give her mother that much, but she felt completely safe. She belonged, if that made any kind of sense. She was more a part of the fields than the village. In the village people admired the fields for their beauty, but they also had a deep mistrust of the place. Meg could never understand that mistrust, and felt it was unfounded. It had started long before she was born.

Occasionally cattle and sheep would stray into the fields. A few were never found, but most were. The villagers would come across the animals contentedly eating or sleeping. This in itself was not exceptional. But the food would be something that didn't grow in that area, set out in a neat pile. Sometimes there would be a small hole dug, filled with fresh water. The nearest spring was at the farthest edge of the fields. Since everyone in the village denied the action ("why wouldn't I just bring the beastie home?") the villagers came to the conclusion there was something living in the fields. Maybe it was friendly but they weren't taking chances. So the creature became a legend long before her time and parents used it to keep their children safe in the village. They called it the "Keeper" because it took care of things it had found. So far that is. And, as her Da was fond of saying, "Ye'd best not be out in there lest he get the urge to keep YOU!"

So Meg spent the rest of the day with her mother in the sun filled kitchen, preoccupied with her thoughts.

Meg's Da was a worker in Gonas Mill. He and twelve other big, burly Irishmen like him, worked the nine to seven shift every day save Sunday. "For the Lord's day is no time to be sullying yer hands in a damp place."

Most of the time her Da was in a good mood arriving home. That evening was no exception, so Meg decided she would ask him some questions. If he would answer her maybe she'd be able to understand the other's feelings about the fields.

"Da?"

"Hmm?"

"C'n I talk to you for awhile?"
He looked up at his daughter, amused; she was always asking questions. He admired her curiosity and valued her opinions, even if she was just a slip of a girl.

"Sure Meg, what's on your mind then?"

"I just wanted to hear some more about the fields."

Meg's father looked at her and frowned. Just last night before bed he'd said to his wife she wasn't asking about the fields any more.

"Are you sure?" his wife had asked. "She has been pestering me about them."

"Maureen, don't fret none about it. Soon she'll turn her head to schooling an' the Mill."

"I don't know," said his wife. "She seems so set on them."

Her husband rolled over with a grunt and muttered, "Maureen, sleep will you? Don't fret."

And now here she stood in front of him, waiting for him to say something. Her father sighed, shifted in his chair then finally nodded.

"What's the Keeper?" asked Meg.

Her father smiled and tapped the side of his nose. "No one really knows for sure, Pet. Some people say they've seen it though."

Meg's eyes grew big at the thought. Seen it? It must have scared those villagers for sure! She said, "Tell me all about it, Da."

"Well, O.K. I will. Your Granda saw it; don't look so shocked. He liked the fields. Spent a lot of time there." At this he looked at her. "You're very like him sometimes. He was on his way home from the mill after a late shift and decided to cut through the fields. He saw a large shape moving, looked like a tree, he said. It wasn't anchored down like what's natural. It turned and looked at him and it spoke.

"Spoke? Spoke to him? Why didn't you ever tell me this? That's marvelous!"

Her father smiled. "And have you out there day and night looking to talk to it? Nay, lass! Anyhow it told him he was a good man who knew the value of nature and his offspring would surely tend to the nature one day." He chuckled, "My mum kept me in sight all th' time, was afraid I'd run off to th' fields as an apprentice of sorts."

Meg was incredulous. "You mean it's true then? He isn't just a legend?"

Her Da laughed, "Ah Meg, I don' know. The next morning Keith Tarnk called to see if your Granda got home O.K. Seems as if he stopped off for a few at th' tavern on the way from the mill."

Meg had a speculative look in her eyes. "Who's Keith Tarnk?" But Da broke off the conversation, exclaiming about his hunger and suggesting they fix a snack. And Meg didn't ask any more questions.
Things went on as they always had and Meg never questioned either of her parents about the fields. She went everyday, notebook in hand, observing and recording. Her Da joked she'd make a fine scientist some day. Her parents thought since she didn't talk about the Keeper she must have forgotten. Nothing could be further from the truth. Meg thought about him and dreamt about him. She just knew better than to share it with her parents. Like as not they'd pack her off to the Vicar for a long, serious talk. So she kept it to herself.

Soon the school year came to a close. Meg didn't really have friends, she was too introverted. So on the last day when the rest of her class was saying goodbye and making plans, she sat quietly looking at the fields through the window. "Soon," she whispered. "Soon we'll have three months."

Meg spent everyday in the fields and her skin grew brown and her muscles strong. Her parents smiled at her young healthiness and her obvious happiness.

Occasionally Meg would see a farmer cutting across the fields or a mill worker on his way home. They waved and yelled a "Hallo, Meg!" but no one stopped. Meg wondered why even the farmers seemed uneasy.

The first time Meg saw him she was much more than slightly curious. For one thing, he was the first man she'd seen walking in the fields. The villagers moved with a restless hurried-ness. This man moved at an easy comfortable pace.

He reminded her of the toys old Mr. O'Connor had make for the children. The wooden ones you could make dance if you put a thin stick in their back and banged lightly on the plywood under their feet. He moved as if all his limbs were individual beings each taking their time to look around and enjoy the day. He carried a young deer over his shoulders.

He stopped on the small rise and looked at her. He said nothing. He just looked at her. For a long time after Meg would remember that look. It was measuring and curious at the same time. Then he smiled at her. She blinked and he was gone.

Meg saw the man often. He never said anything to her, but she got the feeling that he somehow approved of her and her being there.

Then came the day he spoke. She had found a young racoon and splintered its leg which had been caught in a trap. As she finished the job and was experiencing satisfaction she heard a "Hmph." She turned and found herself looking at the man.

"Did a good job with that one," he said.
"Thank you. You surprised me."

He looked at her out of eyes like black onyx. "Sometimes I can move real quiet."

Meg smiled and the man twinkled at her. She felt she knew him and said so.
"Aye, you know me, but not th' way you think. If I've judged you right I've got somethin' you might like to see."

Meg hesitated a second then rose, taking the raccoon with her.

His name was Jac and he showed her a young doe about to give birth. He explained she was late about two weeks. Meg spent the day with him amazed at the things he showed her. She thought she knew the fields! It seemed she'd barely scratched the surface.

At the end of the day she said, "Can I come back tomorrow? Would you show me more?"

He smiled very gently and said softly, "Why yes, lass. I've waited a long time."

Meg went everyday and Jac showed her every nuance of the fields. She considered herself a sort of apprentice to him. And gradually her respect for him grew into something more.

The door creaked as Meg walked in the house. Somethings never change, she thought.

"Mum? I'm home."

"Come here Meg. Now." The quiet command surprised her, and she moved fast.

She walked in the parlor where her mother, the Vicar and her father were talking. Tension was as thick as the rushes in the fields.

"Sit down, Lass" said her father, his eyes full of doubt, and something else; with a shock Meg realized it was fear.

"Where were you today?" asked her mother.

"In the fields Mum, you knew —"

But her mother cut her off. "Who was the man? He isn't from the village; he wasn't recognized."

"That's just Jac, Mum."

The Vicar looked at her, his eyes bright. "Jac? A good name. And the man?"

Meg looked bewildered, "Is he good? Well, yes. He's my teacher."

A moan from her mother and a satisfied nod from the Vicar. Her father wouldn't look at her face.

The Vicar, his voice full of righteous fury, began to speak: "And he will take the lamb and despoil and tempt . . . ."

"What are you talking about?" yelled Meg.

"Meg. Meggie." Her father faltered and stared.

"Meggie?" He hadn't called her that since she was knee high.

"Say what you want," said Meg impatiently.

The Vicar, with a strange twitch of his mouth said, "Jac is the Keeper."
That night, she lay on her bed, a cool breeze blowing through the window. She knew they were talking about her but didn't even want to listen.

"Meg?" She turned her head to see Jac leaning on the sill with his head to one side.

She closed her eyes. When she opened them he was still there.

"How come you never told me?"

He smiled, "You wouldn't have been ready, Pet." Never before had he spoken so gently. Meg sighed. What would happen now?

"You could come," he said. She jerked her head to look at him. Could he read her mind?

"You were open," he said, extending his hand.

Meg could hear the voices in the room next to hers as she slowly stood up. He helped her out the window just as the three adults came in the room. The Vicar made a sign of the cross, her mother let out a wail, but Da just nodded and said, "I'm sorry I was never ready, Sir."

Jac smiled, "Tis all right, Lad you're a good one and you shall prosper and so shall your descendants."

Meg smiled, "Goodbye. I will be here you know. Come to the fields if you wish."

They turned and walked away, hand in hand, the strange man and the graceful young woman. When they reached the center of the fields Jac smiled at her and spoke. "Love, I'm very tired, I must go now. I'll be with you."

Meg nodded, tears in her eyes, of joy or sorrow, she could not tell.

Jac pulled her to him, kissed her softly, then hugged her fiercely. And Meg, with some strength she didn't know she had, drew him in. She was ready to Keep.

by Lisa Raymoure