

# The Ballad of Tam Lin

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*Even fairies have their problems.*

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"O I forbid you, maidens all, That wear gold in your hair, To come or go by Carterhaugh, For young Tam Lin is there." -"The Ballad of Tam Lin," Traditional. \*\*\* Halfway through the forest the carriage stopped for no reason and wouldn't budge an inch. Lady Astrid fanned herself as the coachman tried to get them going again. "What seems to be the problem?" "Can't say ma'am," said the driver. "It's like the wheels just don't want to turn." "Wheels turn; it's what they do. Why should we stop for no reason?" "Reason is overrated," said a voice. Lady Astrid screamed. There was a man in her carriage, a very young, very handsome, very well-dressed man, with his legs crossed and a rapier dangling in one hand. "How did you get in here?" she said. "Through the door," said the strange man. "It's a kind of moving panel over in the side here, makes getting in and getting out very convenient, you ought to try it if you haven't yet. Now madam, this is a robbery: If it's your first then don't worry, I'll be gentle." He held up a bag and pointed the tip of the sword at her. "Something the matter ma'am?" said the driver. "Not at all," said the strange man. "It's just a routine holdup. Stay where you are, unless you think the lady needs some ventilation. Now madam, your rings and bracelets and broaches." Lady Astrid deposited her jewelry into the sack. She added some candid comments about the robber's parentage, which he thought were a nice touch. "And the diamond. Don't forget that." She held the ring to her chest. "But it's the symbol of my eternal fidelity and trust in my beloved husband!" "Which is why I think it's very insincere for you to still be wearing it." Lady Astrid went white, but she dropped the ring into the bag. "I know you," she said. "You're the one they call Tam Lin. The duke warned us about you: a thieving, roguish fairy." "I may be a thief, and I may be a rogue, and I may be a fairy, but...well, anyway, it was nice meeting you. Give my regards to the duke." Tam Lin sprang out the carriage window and sprinted for the trees. Lady Astrid yelled out the window, "You forgot your sword!" "Keep it," said Tam Lin. "It's only a stick." She looked. A moment ago it had been a sword, but now it was, indeed, a stick. She gnashed her teeth, jumped from the carriage, pushed the driver aside, and ran after him, hoisting her skirts over the brambles. Though it was late October, the forest was still as bright and lively as the spring in Carterhaugh: flowers bloomed, trees were heavy with fruit, birds trilled, and sunlight slanted warm and golden through the boughs. It was disgustingly pleasant. Lady Astrid cast around in the weeds and the brush, but saw no sign of the escaped fairy. It was midday and the shadows were very small, but somehow he'd slipped

away into them. "Tam Lin!" she shouted. "Tam Lin!" "Yes?" said a voice right next to her. She jumped. Tam Lin sat on a low tree branch, eating an apple and twirling her wedding ring around his finger. "Give that back!" she said. "I'm not sure you understand precisely how robbery works." "You can keep the rest," she said. "I can keep it all. It's a tax for coming through my forest." He jumped and landed right next to her, leaning in very close and sniffing her perfume. "Unless you'd care to pay the other toll?" Lady Astrid backed away. "You keep your hands off me." "What about my other parts?" She clutched her fan to her chest. "The stories say you only do that to young, virginal girls." "There are fewer and fewer young virgins every day, so I'm thinking of relaxing my standards. Come, come, we both know why you came this way. The duke put out a proclamation not a week ago warning everyone to stay away from Carterhaugh, and yet here you are." "It was the fastest way," said Lady Astrid. "You're coming by way of the glen. This forest detour adds two days on your trip for no reason. I know that Lord Astrid is in his eighties and deaf as a post so I can only imagine the bloom wore off that peach the moment it fell. And more importantly, you're wearing green." She looked at her dress. "So?" He touched her cheek. "You know what kind of woman wears green, don't you?" She blushed. "I'd heard it was a color that fairies enjoy." "We do. Principally because it doesn't show grass stains." She threw herself on him and knocked him over. They landed in a patch of clover that he just happened to be standing in front of, and she rolled on top of him. "Well," she said, catching her breath, "I had to make it look good, didn't I?" "And you look very good indeed." "I wanted to see if the stories were true," Lady Astrid said, touching his face and running her hands over his chest. "What do you think?" "I don't know," she said, "I haven't verified the best parts yet. Help me out of my dress." Back on the road, the coachman began to wonder how long he should wait before assuming that Lady Astrid was dead. It was getting dark, and the woods certainly seemed perilous. He heard what sounded an awful lot like wildcats screeching in the bushes. "Ohhhhhh!" said Lady Astrid. Tam Lin concurred. They lay concealed by the tall grass, Lady Astrid's cloak spread out under them. Her dress was hanging from a tree branch, and the rest of her clothes had probably landed somewhere near the shore of the stream. He repositioned himself a little and slid back inside her, her thighs closing tightly around his body and her hips rolling up to meet his. There was a wavelike motion to their two bodies moving in tandem. He let her set the pace for a little while, reacting when she bucked underneath him and then only going half as fast as he could. She was sweating and flushed and hoarse, but he still looked immaculate. He never looked anything less than immaculate unless he wanted to. They looked into each other's eyes, unblinking, and Tam Lin laid a kiss on her gasping lips every few seconds, a tiny touch of his mouth against hers, sucking in her panting breaths. She dragged her nails over his back. He responded by pushing into her harder, and she practically gushed in return, growing so wet that she overflowed. "Oh God!" she screamed. "Oh my God!" "I'm not really comfortable with titles like that," he said. "But I appreciate the—MMPH!" She grabbed his head and forced it to hers, tongue sliding into his mouth. Her body bent and she reached down to cup his backside, one cheek in each hand, as it gyrated and pumped up and down. "I'm going to, I'm going to—ohhhhhh!" Lady Astrid screamed again. Tam Lin thought she was a little verbose, but he guessed when your husband is stone deaf you don't really worry about such things. Back on the road, the

coachman locked himself inside the carriage for fear that the wildcats might accost him. They sounded quite fierce. Lady Astrid was up on her hands and knees now, Tam Lin behind her, tracing the length of her back with one fingertip before following the curve down her hip and to the underside, glancing over her naked thighs and then to the place where they meet. She seemed to have lost her voice for a bit, which Tam Lin decided was probably a good thing, as she was about to get a whole lot more worked up and he wasn't sure a racket was such a good idea this time of night. He began a steady back and forth, his hips bouncing off of her backside every time he went in, and as he reached under and cupped her breasts with both hands he increased his pace, each thrust just a little bit faster than the one before, each push just a little bit harder. Her arms went weak and she lay facedown with her backside arched in the air. Her cunt overflowed, running down her thighs, "Oh God!" screamed Lady Astrid, sounding hoarse. "Yes?" said Tam Lin. "Fill me!" And he was, pumping streams into her, a hot, satisfying gush, one after another. He bit his lip and furrowed his brow as hard as he could. She kept shaking for a long time, and when he finally pulled out he fell backwards into the grass, with a sigh. He was looking up at the stars. He thought they looked better from Carterhaugh than anywhere else in the world. Not that he ever really went anywhere else than Carterhaugh anymore. But then, why would he, if there was no better place? He was reflecting on the moon when he noticed that Lady Astrid had retrieved most of her clothes (she was still missing one glove, her hat, and a layer of bloomers) and was heading back toward the road. He (still naked) caught up with her, sliding his arms around her waist and kissing her ear. "Off so soon, my turtledove?" he said. "Get off me," she said, pushing him. "Excuse me?" he said. "You've made me late," said Lady Astrid. "I sure as hell hope not, I'm not cut out to be a father. Anyway, it's hardly my fault. You're the one who kept insisting on more. I believe your exact words were 'Oh yes, Jesus Christ, Lord in Heaven, more, more, more...'" "I never said any such thing." "I may have been wrong on the precise number of 'mores', but the gist is still—" She stuck her fan in his face. "I. Never. Said. Any. Such. Thing. You robbed me and I went looking for you and did not find you. Got it?" He paused. "On further reflection, that does correspond to my recollection." She left. Tam Lin watched her go. "I feel rather used," he said out loud. Then he smiled. "Life is good." When he found his pants (third branch up), Lady Astrid's ring was still in the pocket. "Life is very, very good," he said, and deposited the ring in the hollow trunk of an oak tree. With the others. \*\*\* A few hours later Tam Lin sat in the highest branches of the highest tree and watched the moon. There was something strange about it tonight. For one thing, he didn't think it should be full yet. For another, it was a shade of pale yellow that looked very unhealthy to him. And yet nothing in the forest seemed out of place, nothing unusual had occurred lately, and no omens had appeared. Maybe the moon was just having an off night. It happens to people from time to time, so why not moons? Above him, two doves nestled their heads against each other. On the branch above them, an owl perched, waiting for them to move. Tam Lin frowned. Well, that seems like an omen, he thought. Then again, to the owl it just seems like dinner. Can't go reading omens into every little thing, even if this tree is oozing sap that looks remarkably like blood. Maybe that was just a trick of the light from this bad moon? There was nothing, he was sure, that could disturb the peace and perfection of Carterhaugh, even on a night like this. Nothing except... A cold wind blew. The moon

shimmered. Tam Lin almost fell out of his tree. Oh no, he thought. Oh no, oh no, oh no. Oh my—! he thought, and then stopped, as fairies have nothing sacred to swear by, so he simply settled for "Oh my!" He clamored down the branches, the wind plucking at his hair and clothes. It was a terribly cold wind, and it blew from the direction of the moon, chilling his bones. He got almost to the ground before she caught up with him, and Tam Lin, thinking fast, landed in a kneeling position rather than on his feet. "Your majesty!" he said, bowing as low as he could. "Tam Lin," said the Queen of Fairies. "I've come to see you." She was very tall, and very pale, and where she stood the ground froze. Her words were punctuated by little puffs of chilling fog from her pale white lips. The moon hung behind her head, as it always did, and its cold, pale light made Tam Lin's teeth chatter. "I'm m-m-most honored." "Are you enjoying your domain?" said the Queen. "Carterhaugh is very...bountiful, this time of year." He paused. "Well, lovely to see you again, do stop by anytime, always a pleasure." "It's almost Hallo'ween," said the Queen. Tam Lin's heart turned to ice. "How about that? Time flies. I think I'll be keeping out of the festivities this year if it's all the same." "It's been seven years," said the Queen of Fairies. She touched a stray lock of Tam Lin's hair and he gasped in pain. "And here it seems like it was only yesterday. In fact, I think it was. Are you sure your calendar isn't just a bit off, my queen?" "The court will meet here that night, Tam Lin," said the Queen. "All of us, here, in Carterhaugh." "Lovely," said Tam Lin, his voice as dark as mud. The moonshine hurt his eyes. The Queen smiled, and when she did birds screamed and dropped from the trees, dead. She rose up, and the moon rose up with her, and when Tam Lin looked up they were both secure in the sky again. But he felt her eyes on him. He hid in a cave by the stream and rubbed his hands over his arms and chest, trying to warm himself, his mind racing all the while. "A seven-year Hallo'ween," he said. "I'm doomed." \*\*\* "Tam Lin!" shouted Sir Guyon. He crashed into the brush, sword in hand. "Tam Lin!" "Normally it's only very charming ladies who scream my name that loud." Tam Lin's voice came from the bushes, but it was never the same bush twice. "Come out and fight me, coward!" said Sir Guyon. "I don't think you quite understand how cowardice works, sir knight," said Tam Lin. "Where have you taken my wife?" "A better question would be: where haven't I taken her? By the river, on the hill, in the field..." "The devil's in your mouth!" "Actually, right now it's in hers," said Tam Lin, from his hiding place in the barrow under the hill. Lady Guyon's head bobbed in his lap. "I demand satisfaction!" said Sir Guyon. "That's a coincidence: So does she." Lady Guyon giggled and Tam Lin put a finger to his lips, shushing her. He stretched out, hands behind his head, and let Lady Guyon take him fully into her mouth. The little barrow was soon full of the obscene noise of her slurping on him. She teased the head of him by running her tongue around the rim, then opened wide and swallowed the rest, tickling the underside of the shaft with her tongue. "I will give you until the count of five!" said Sir Guyon. "That's a good timetable. I can support that," said Tam Lin. "One!" Lady Guyon slid Tam Lin in and out of her pursed lips, bobbing again. She rolled her eyes and made a moaning sound that sent a hum down to his base. "Two!" Lady Guyon pushed him down her throat, suppressing the urge to gag and sucking her lips as tightly as possible around him. "Three!" Tam Lin laced his fingers through her dark hair and pushed against her mouth, gently but firmly, sliding over her pillowy lips. He pinched his brow, concentrating. This would be a lot easier without that big ox's voice distracting me, he thought.

But what would be the challenge in that? "Four!" said Sir Guyon. Lady Guyon opened wide, letting him grind against her lips. He felt something jerk and trigger inside of him, and his grip tightened. "Five!" said Sir Guyon. "Ahhhhh!" said Tam Lin. "Mmmm!" said Lady Guyon. There was a moment of silence. "Well?" said Sir Guyon. "Well, it was good for me," said Tam Lin. "What about you?" Lady Guyon giggled. Sir Guyon huffed. "What was good?" he said. "Nothing, nothing," said Tam Lin. He waited until Lady Guyon had licked her lips, then kissed her and whispered "Now remember, you were magicked the whole time. You don't remember a thing." She nodded and he kissed her hand, sliding her wedding ring off as he did. Lady Guyon stumbled out of the trees, weaved over to where her husband was hacking up a thorn bush with his sword, and executed a perfect swoon right into his arms. Tam Lin spun her ring around his finger as he watched him carry her away. He sighed. His heart really wasn't in it today. He climbed up into the oak tree and stowed the ring in the hollow. The tree stirred. "Hello, Tam Lin," it said. "Hello, Old Oak." "Up to no good?" "No good is up to me, that's for certain," he said. "It's almost Hallo'ween." "I know. I feel it in my trunk." "It's a seven-year Hallo'ween. You know what that means." "Ah," said the tree. "The Tithe." "Yes, the Tithe," said Tam Lin, chin in hand. "The Queen means for it to be me. She as much as said so last night. What am I going to do?" The tree thought. "You could break the curse." Tam Lin perked up. "Of course! That would solve everything." "What would you have to do?" "All I need is for a good-hearted, virtuous, steadfast woman to fall completely in love with me." He smiled. Then he frowned. "I'm doomed." "I thought all women love you?" said the tree. "Of course they love me," said Tam Lin. "But I don't think any of them, you know, LOVE me." He pondered. "What about the Queen?" said the tree. "She's a woman. Just work your charms on her and get her to pick someone else for the Tithe." "She's not like other women," said Tam Lin. "You could freeze beer between her tits. I tried it once. Even if I got between her legs I'd be liable to freeze off my —" "Root." "You can say that again." "Root." "No, Oak, it's a figure of speech." "I'm talking about my roots. Someone is traipsing around them right now." Tam Lin peered through the branches. "Is it Sir Guyon?" "Not unless he's in the mood to pick flowers." Tam Lin slid down the trunk. There was a woman in a green cloak picking the roses that grew around the base of Old Oak. She paused before plucking a pair of buds growing from one stem. "Ah," he said, "looks like I have some flower picking of my own to do. My lucky day. Of course, they're all lucky days for me. And yet I never get tired of it. Is that strange?" The woman was moving on. Tam Lin dropped to the ground and went after her. He saw no reason for his impending death to spoil the moment. \*\*\* It was a warm day, but Janet wrapped her mantle around herself tighter. It was her best green cloak and she wanted for it to be as visible as possible. She'd crossed over into Carterhaugh half an hour ago and she was beginning to think that this was taking an inordinately long time, so she set on the flowers hoping that perhaps that would get his attention. It seemed to work. "I don't mind if you take my flowers," said a voice, "but I'm going to have to ask for something in repayment. Everything you have on you will do." Janet tossed her hair back. "The flowers aren't yours, Tam Lin," she said. A very handsome man appeared from behind a rock too small to hide him. He smiled and sat on a stump. "How did you know it was me?" "You're predictable." "Have we met?" "Never once," she said, walking by the stump. "That's how predictable you are." "Then I've never robbed you, and

I'm afraid it's only polite. You did come into Carterhaugh without my permission, after all."

"Carterhaugh isn't yours, it's mine," said Janet. "Why are you pointing a stick at me?" Tam Lin looked down. "You don't see a sword?" "No, and with you around I don't expect I ever will." "Interesting," said Tam Lin, tossing the stick aside. "What do you mean, Carterhaugh is yours?" "My father gave it to me as a birthday present." She sat by the stream, skipping stones. "Ah!" said Tam Lin. "So you're the duke's daughter. And even though your father gave express command that no one should come here, here you are. And you're wearing green to boot." "I like green," said Janet. "It matches my eyes. I came to the forest because it's mine. I put up with you being here because I've never had occasion to visit until now. But I think you're wearing out your welcome." Tam Lin whispered in her ear. "We both know the real reason you're here. It's because Lady Astrid has a big mouth." He leaned in further. "And she also has a very big—" "Excuse me?!" "—carriage. Enormous. But very comfortable. I've been inside it, you know." "Louse," said Janet. Tam Lin transformed into a louse and hopped onto her breast. She swatted him. "That could have killed me," said Tam Lin, turning back into a man. "What," said Janet, "my breast?" "That too. You know Janet, I think you're holding my reputation against me, but there are things about me you don't know. For example, I live under a terrible curse." "Who doesn't?" said Janet, skipping stones again. "It's true. I wasn't always a fairy. Once I was as human as you are." "Less, I would think." "And a knight of some renown." "Then why have I never heard of you?" "I said some renown, not much renown." "Well tell me, Tam Lin, why did you come here to dwell?" "Because the Queen of Fairies caught me when I fell from my horse," said Tam Lin. He skipped a stone that hit hers in midair. "Drunk?" "Not enough." Janet shrugged. "Why are you telling me this?" Tam Lin, for once, had to choose his words carefully. "What you might not know about the Queen of Fairies is that at the end of every seven years she pays a Tithe to Hell by sacrificing one of her subjects. It's going to happen soon, and I'm afraid it's going to be me." "Why you?" "It's always the most beautiful she chooses." He shook his hair out. It shimmered. "And this is your curse?" "Yes. I'm cursed to haunt these woods until the queen murders me. Or until a virtuous, kind-hearted woman falls in love with me and helps me become mortal again." He threw up his hands. "But where am I going to find one of those?" Janet turned, stood right in front of him, and looked him in the eye for the first time. He smiled. She didn't. He flinched. They stood face to face for a long time without speaking. Tam Lin felt uncomfortable. It was a first. Finally Janet said, "All right then." He blinked. "All right what?" "All right then, it's me. I love you." "You do?" said Tam Lin. "Oh yes," said Janet, turning and sitting by the riverbank again. "Very much. With all my heart. At first sight." She looked at her nails. "Um...wonderful?" said Tam Lin. He frowned. This is not how he'd imagined the moment. "Is that all it takes?" said Janet. Tam Lin cleared his throat. "I believe there's some additional consummation. As a formality." He began rubbing her shoulders. She nodded. "I was afraid of that." She laid her green cloak on the grass. Then she laid down on it, face-up, propping her hands behind her head and gesturing to Tam Lin. "Well, come on then: Take me." She said it in tones usually reserved for ordering someone to clean the stables. Tam Lin, breaking all known precedent, hesitated. On one hand, here was a beautiful woman who had given him an unambiguous go-ahead. On the other hand, her body language suggested less a woman and more a fallen tree. And while he had absolutely no

experience in the matter, he was reasonably certain that true love was supposed to seem a bit more...well, true. Maybe she's just nervous, he told himself. Janet examined the stitching of her cloak with a critical eye while she waited. Perhaps a kiss would loosen her up? He lay beside her, running his fingers through her hair, touching her cheek, leaning in and pressing his lips to her soft, red, trembling— "Excuse me?" Janet said. Tam Lin sat up. "Hmm?" "Don't tell me you need directions?" Janet said. "Your business is down there, not up here." "It's customary to usually—" "I don't stand on custom. I don't lie under it either. It's a very long ride back to the castle, so if we could just get a move on with the particulars?" "Look, are you sure you're in love with me?" "Does that sound like something I'd be unsure of?" "Increasingly, yes." "Oh fine," said Janet, sitting up and sighing. "Tam Lin, you're the most spectacular man I've ever met. Tam Lin, you're an Adonis, I can't live without you. Tam Lin, you've stoked an unquenchable fire in my loins and I can't bear another minute without your touch. Take me, oh take me now my brave champion, etc. Convinced?" Not really, thought Tam Lin, but the hell with it. He unfastened his breeches. Janet lay back again and pulled up her riding skirts, which she'd had the forethought to wear with a minimum of undergarments. Tam Lin had to coax her legs apart. Finally he got himself well-situated and then...and then... Janet sighed again. "Problem?" "...this has never happened to me before." "You cannot be serious." "Well, all right, once, but that was with a wood nymph and she was very—" "No, I mean, you cannot seriously be having this problem now?" "Because you see it was autumn and in autumn a wood nymph gets to be—" "Tam Lin!" Janet snapped her fingers in front of his face. "Let's not worry about all the women you've failed to satisfy over the years. Just concentrate on the woman you're failing to satisfy now." Now it was Tam Lin's turn to be cross. "You're not exactly helping, you know." "What else do you need me to do?" Janet looked around. "I'm here, I'm lying in the glen, I'm facing up; to hear most of the stories this is all the cooperation you should need. I don't even necessarily have to be awake for the next part, as I understand it." "Generally there's a little more to—" He stopped. He was looking at her bosom. Janet looked too; she thought she might have a bug on her or something. "Unlace your bodice," Tam Lin said. "Why?" "Because you have breasts that would give a dead man an erection. And anyway, it's—" "Customary?" Tam Lin pinched the bridge of his nose. "Oh fine," Janet said, busy with the laces. Tam Lin watched as her body was revealed one inch of retreating fabric at a time. His eyes went wide. Then wider. Then wider. When Janet finished she leaned back, propping herself up on her hands. "Satisfied?" "Not yet, but just give me a minute," Tam Lin said, busy with his codpiece. "A minute, is that all?" "Don't go developing standards now or we'll never get through this." "That's the most sensible thing you've said all day." Janet shook her shoulders, making her breasts jiggle. "Come on then." Tam Lin's hands roamed over her, taking a double handful and squeezing. Janet jumped. "Hey, those are attached!" "And what a fetching frame they're attached to," Tam Lin said. "That kind of talk will get nothing out of me," said Janet. "Just hurry up and—ooh!" She jumped again as he kissed a nipple. His tongue flickered over it. Janet shivered. "Ahem. As I was saying, that's not going to—" "Lie back please." "Yes, of course." Janet laid back. "As I was saying, don't go thinking that just because of your dozens and dozens and dozens—" "And dozens." "Yes, and dozens of other women were easy to—" "Legs open." "Of course. What was I saying?" "Dozens and dozens of women." "Right. You

can't go thinking that just because—OH!" Janet gasped and all the muscles in her body went rigid...then relaxed all at once. "Oh..." she said. "Oh...my..." "Don't go taking my name in vain yet, we've just started." "Tam Lin?" "Hmm?" "Stop talking." She put her hand over his mouth. "Just...do what you do best." \*\*\* Janet sat in her father's hall and kept quiet while the wise woman worked. Her father paced the room and chewed his nails. The wise woman kept whistling, for some reason. Finally the old woman stood and nodded and said, "She is." The duke's shoulders slumped. "How can you tell? It's only been a week." "I can tell," said the wise woman. "It's what I do." "I'm afraid that settles it," said Janet, "Obviously I can't marry Sir Topaz now. I'm so sorry, father." The duke moaned. "How could this happen?" "Same way it happened when you were that age," said the wise woman. "They haven't changed the rules since then." Janet traced a pattern on the windowpane. "I swear I remember nothing. I'm sure Tam Lin must have enchanted me." "Fourth girl this year I've seen fell under that particular enchantment," said the wise woman. "Damn that rake," said the duke. "I'll burn the forest to the ground!" He went to Janet and hugged her. She did not return it. "We'll find a way to fix this." "Fix it?" said Janet. "Whatever do you mean?" The duke bit his lip. "Go to Sir Topaz. Spend the night with him. If you see him now, he'll never have reason to suspect that the baby isn't his. He's not very bright anyway..." Janet looked shocked. "I can't marry any man but the baby's true father! It would be...a sin." "That's right," said the wise woman. The duke scowled at her. "What do you propose?" said the duke. "You can't marry a wood spirit." Janet was quiet for a little while. "He wasn't always a spirit. Once he was a knight. And he could be again, or so he told me." The duke perked up. "Is that true? I mean, can you really believe what he says?" "I don't know. But it might be our only hope. You would approve, father, as long as he was an earthly knight? It wouldn't matter that he wasn't who you chose?" "It matters. It sure as hell matters," said the duke, stroking his beard. "But...I could live with it. What do we do?" "Just leave that to me," Janet said. And she went to get her green cloak. \*\*\* Tam Lin was disguised as a puddle on the side of the road when she arrived, but of course Janet recognized him right away. "Oh, hello," he said, sitting up and drying himself off. She kissed his cheek. It was a grey day, and the leaves on the trees were dying, and there was a chill in the air. Tam Lin looked grey around the edges himself. "You don't seem well?" she said. "I'm not well. I'm going to die. It's Hallo'ween and I still can't leave Carterhaugh." "You can't?" said Janet, sitting down with the clover. "How very odd." "I don't understand it: Once I have the love of a good woman that should break the curse. Unless..." He grabbed Janet by the shoulders and shook her a little. "Janet, you do love me, don't you? Really?" "Of course," she said, studying the grass blades under her feet. "Truly. Deeply. With all my heart." "Janet...I'm beginning to suspect you've taken advantage of me." "Are you upset?" "No, impressed. Very impressed. But it doesn't help either of us right now. You're pregnant, aren't you?" She nodded. "And you wanted to help me so that I can get you out of an engagement, don't you?" "Are you reading my mind?" "No, just your behavior. You can't marry me if I'm dead, you know." "I can't marry you anyway, not until you're a proper man." "I haven't been a proper man in my entire life," said Tam Lin. "I can't believe it's going to end like this. I have so much to live for. There are songs, and wines, and women, and food, and women, and the forest, and women..." Janet took her cloak off, laid it on the grass, and stretched out on it to think. "This Tithe," she said, "there's a



ceremony?" "Yes," said Tam Lin, his voice flat. "What if we stopped it? She can't sacrifice you if we don't let the sacrifice happen, right?" He laughed. "Oh, that's rich. You'll stop her, will you? She's the Queen of Fairies and you're—" He stopped. "You're...someone magic doesn't work on. I think? He held up his hand. "What do you see?" "A rock." "Not a diamond?" "No, just a rock." "She sees right through me," said Tam Lin. "Janet, I'm having a thought." "There's a first time for everything." "As I've said to so many young women these seven years," he said. "But I think I know how we can save me. By which I mean us. But only if you're feeling very brave." He looked at her. "Are you very brave, Janet?" She put both hands on her belly. "I hope so," she said. \*\*\* The fairies arrived one by one, and the bells hanging from their bridles rang through the forest, a warning to any mortal foolish enough to be out on Hallo'ween night. Tam Lin rode on the white steed, nearest to the town. As he'd once been an earthly knight, they afforded him a place of renown, though given the aim of their gathering he was not sure he enjoyed being singled out. As they neared the crossroads he broke ranks and rode side by side with the Queen. Her horse was an unholy looking thing, and everywhere it set its great hooves the ground broke. The Queen herself started straight ahead, eyes like diamonds. "Lovely evening, isn't it your majesty?" he said. "It is an evening," said the Queen. "A lovely evening," said Tam Lin, smiling. The Queen did not reply. Her retainers kept their distance. They were all curious to see what was going to happen, but none of them wanted to risk being in the zone of the splatter if the Queen decided to discipline him for his impropriety. Tam Lin stopped to mop his forehead with a silk handkerchief (one of Lady Roanoke's, judging from the embroidery). Though it was an unseasonably cold night he was sweating profoundly. They were almost at the crossroads, and the well. He cleared his throat. "Pardon me," he said, "but if it's not impertinent to ask, I don't believe we've yet decided, or at least, it hasn't yet been announced...what I mean to say, your majesty: Who is it, this year?" The Queen of Fairies turned her head; her retinue cowered. Even Tam Lin had to blanch. She said nothing, but pointed up ahead at the crossroads. Tam Lin's horse almost bolted. He swallowed. "I see," he said. Then, louder, he said, "I suppose there's nothing to be done about it now. Can't save a damned man." He waited. "I said, can't save a damned man!" The fairies stared. Tam Lin's horse pawed at the ground. Tam Lin found he was sweating even more. He licked his lips and tried one last time: "Can't save—!" Now, finally, there came a crashing and a thumping from the bushes. Janet leapt from her hiding place beside the well, streaked through the ranks of the fairies and, before any of them could react, reached the steed she'd aimed for and dragged its rider down to the ground. The horse reared away, bells on its bridle ringing, and Janet stood over the downed rider, glowering at any who dared come close. "You cannot have this man," she said. "I have a claim to him that's deeper than any of yours. If you would challenge me for him, then let's see how all of your fairy magic compare to—" "Um, Janet?" said Tam Lin. "What?" She glared. "I'm over here." She paused. She looked at the fairy on the ground. Then she looked at Tam Lin, still on his horse. She blushed. "I told you I'd be on the white horse," Tam Lin said, hissing. "That was a white horse!" "That horse is grey." "Well it's dark!" "Is it so dark that you've gone blind? Because that's the only way—" "Excuse me?" said the fairy on the ground. "Can I get up now?" "Oh!" said Janet, stepping away with a dainty gesture. "I'm terribly sorry, sir." "Quite all right," said the fairy, dusting himself off. "In fact, if you

wanted to go on with what you were saying..." Janet skirted away. "No, that's okay, I found the one I want. I think." Trotting over to the white steed, she pulled Tam Lin out of his saddle (rather harder than was necessary, he felt), straightened up, brushed her bangs out of her face, and said, "As I was saying, this man is mine. If you any of you would challenge me for the right to him, then show me all the power of your fairy magic, or else disperse." The fairies shied away. Some because they were impressed by the fire in Janet's eyes, but others because they knew the Queen liked a lot of room to work in when she was disemboweling someone. "That man?" said the Queen of Fairies, "That man on the ground?" Janet said nothing. The question did not require an answer, and she knew that answering questions was one way to fall under a fairy's power. Tam Lin seemed to think that magic would not work on her, but he also admitted that the Queen's powers were far beyond his, and you never could be sure what magic was going to do anyway. The Queen pointed at Tam Lin and said, "That man, or that beast?" Janet heard a snarl, and when she looked she saw that Tam Lin had become a savage lion, his great claws and shining white fangs bared. For a moment feared seized her heart, but Tam Lin had warned her about such tricks. Rather than run, she threw her arms around the lion's neck, seizing him by the mane and hugging him tight. The beast grew immediately tame. The Queen made a gesture and Janet felt the body of the lion shrink away. Now in its place there was a great, writhing serpent, and it twined its coils around her, threatening to squeeze the life out of her. But Janet, still prepared by Tam Lin's coaching, seized the snake behind its and kissed it. The coils hung loose around her. The assembled fairies could not suppress a murmur of admiration, though they quieted when they saw the Queen bristle. The Queen pointed to Tam Lin again and now the snake became a red-hot brand, burning with her fury. If Janet did not let go, her flesh would be scorched to the bone. The Queen smiled; she knew she had won. Janet had only seconds to reacts, so she did the only thing there was to do: She dropped the brand. She dropped it right into the well. As the searing metal hit the water a cloud of steam whooshed up. There was a sound like the trunk of a great tree splitting, and, as all assembled watched, the Queen of Fairies staggered, as if struck, and for the first time the fairies of the court saw a flicker of pain on her face. The steam cleared away. At first nothing happened. Then, a hand appeared over the side of the well. Then two. Then, naked, wet, bedraggled, and sore, Tam Lin pulled himself out of the well and flopped onto the ground. "Well?" said Janet. "Yes, a well," said Tam Lin. "I meant, are you human again?" "I'm human and you're inhumane." He shivered and shook his wet hair. Janet draped her cloak around Tam Lin's naked shoulders. "I have baptized this man in the name of God the most holy, the one who turned his back on your kind. You will relinquish all claims to him, in body, mind, and soul, or tempt the wrath of the almighty." The fairies, who could not abide the name of God, fell to their knees in supplication and departed, vanishing in a twinkling and leaving the sound of bells in their midst. Only the Queen herself remained. Her eyes burned like Hell. She raised a hand and prepared to strike Janet down where she stood, or perhaps to exact her final revenge on Tam Lin, but at the very moment, somewhere in the town, too far away to truly be heard but still audible to those extra senses possessed by magical creatures, there came the tolling of a bell. Hallo'ween was over and All Saints Day had begun The Queen had not paid the Tithe on time. With a cry of inhuman rage the Queen

departed. The world seemed to sigh in relief at her absence. Janet allowed herself to breathe again. Tam Lin, doing his best to use her cloak as a bath towel, scarcely noticed that he was saved. "The baptism was a bit much, don't you think?" he said. "It was just an excuse to give you a bath. You smell like a barn." It was a warm night all of a sudden. The stars were out. Tam Lin turned to his bride-to-be. "Janet," he said, "up until now I've been a completely worthless cad for my entire life: a drunkard, a liar, a womanizer, a thief—" "Bit of a slob, too." "As you say. But now that's all going to change." She looked at him. "Most of it will change." She cocked an eyebrow. "One or two things will change. But they'll be big things! Important things! I know you'll be impressed. As of tonight, I'm a brand new man—literally." Janet shrugged and walked to where the last few roses were still hanging, somewhat wilted, on the bush. "Is that your idea of a proposal?" she said. Tam Lin sighed. "Oh, hell." He went down on his knees, but then when he remembered the last thing he was doing on his knees in front of Janet he decided maybe it would be more dignified if he stood. He took a deep breath. "As much as I'd hoped to live my entire life without ever saying these words: Lady, I love you. Will you marry me?" Janet picked a flower. "I suppose I really must." She paused. "But you will have to provide a proper ring." "As it just so happens," Tam Lin said, "I think I know where I can find several for you to choose from."