

THE MOLOTOV COCKTAIL

Nocnitsa (The Night Hag)

by Andrea DeAngelis



She is made of screeches and shadows and smells of moss and dirt. She exists only to consume you until you are anemic and concave with blackened eyes while her eyes grow bright and alive. Below her waist lies shadows and hate, unresolved and undulating.

Your dreams are her nightmares. She feeds off your darkness and requires no invitation to enter your home or you. Sleep on your back with your hands on your chest and you will sleep with the dead. She likes this position the best. Your husband sleeps this way and when he kicks his heels into the mattress repeatedly, startling you awake, he is fighting the Nocnitsa. And when he whispers, he is screaming for help. It is easier not to listen to the writhing susurrus that slip and catch your edges.

That pressure on your chest is from her gnarled hands pressing down into you, until she reaches the spine. She is always awake, even if only a red eye remains open. She is not allowed the respite of oblivion. If she cannot sleep why should you?

When she is not incorporeal, she is in flight as a vampire finch that pursues a similar maiming. A blood sucker bird feeding off other birds like the Nazca, once part of their flock, now without, pecking at the base of their tails with her sharp beak until blood is drawn. There used to be a trembling of them but she is a long way from Wolf Island and her kind. She hasn't seen one like her in aeons. She has never seen a male. She doesn't know how they would be different except, when a finch, their feathers are black and they are larger, although not stronger since none remain. Perhaps her appetite began with their disappearance. Her loneliness is an unending cry.

She does not know what she was first—the finch or the nightmare. When her crooked teeth curl into a wickedly sharp beak, it feels like the horny covering was always there, but when she is drawn downwards, growing hunched and broken with age, that nightmare shape feels as comfortable as an old leather shoe. Her consciousness remains the same, caught between sleeping and waking. In that in-between state, her mind is alert but her body dissipates, it doesn't feel like her body, neither the bird nor the night hag. She was young once. Everything worked. Now her lower half is withered into wisps, a heavy drag on her movements. Will her dry, fragile skin finally flake off and reveal a dragon's scales? She knows a basilisk is within her, but the fire smolders into soot. The embers are deeply buried, low within her smoky mass from where the screeching voice emanates.

Her eternity is spent swapping back and forth between the finch and the hag, one dies and the other is reborn. How she became this way, she cannot say. It was always so, like her egg tooth, the small calcified protrusion that she flicks her black bird tongue over and over obsessively. She gleans no knowledge of its impermanence. As the night hag, she gradually decays until the final diminishment and then emerges as a hatchling, breaking through her eggshell.

Once she had her own dreams, but now she reaps others. She can no longer speak, lost in that perpetual death and rebirth. For she hears none of her past songs—neither the lilting, the whistling nor the buzzing call. She is an abscess of loneliness. Once she had her sisters, but they have died or gone mute, it doesn't matter which for the outcome is the same: emptiness and pain. She fills that void with others' dreams and youth until her victim wastes away.

The who-she-was-before comes back as bile. Why have children when they don't take care of you? When you are stuck in this chair and at their mercies? When everyone leaves you. That is why, when she takes flight, she seeks out the children at night, their dreams are the most malleable and have been her greatest disappointment as the sun slants down between splayed dusty blinds. Here in this place, in-between dreams and sleep, they will tell you when to wake and when to eat, when to shit and when to sleep and when to die. They all could have been the children she never had with their legs that work and their arms that they can easily stretch about their heads like a laugh. If she could suck their blood maybe life would work their way back into her dead limbs and she could fly to Australia like he promised her. Instead of being stuck with the smell of piss and regret, that graying sun and one-room doom. Who you were is no longer and who you are is eternity weighing you down, a wheezing yowl. When you scream inside your head, no one is listening, the words too mangled to be understood.



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