

Chalk, Fish and Monkey

by Shaun Belcher

She picked the fish out of the box leaving a pool of mucus and blood slowly congealing on the shelf and dripped it toward the kitchen table. Outside the wind lashed the tops of the poplar trees together and rain sprayed from the barn roof opposite. She guessed the river would be rising now and looked across at the hills in the distance and wondered what time he'd be back and if the cartwheels were getting bogged down in the chalky mud again. They'd been gone three hours to market and she should be seeing their wagon slowly come around the curve on the down opposite soon.

She was used to watching it crawl along the white chalk road like a fly along cook's apron string. She heard the master scraping his chair back on the wooden floorboards above and the gentle tap of his cane on the floor as he rose to leave the table. Every day he followed the same routine of moving slowly over to the bedroom where he'd sleep off the meal and wine. She heard the chattering of the monkey as it skipped after him and a curse as it got under his feet. Its tiny claws scratching on the boards as it scampered back to the windowsill where it would sit sucking at grapes it had been thrown from the table.

She started to grow nervous as the single horse started descending the chalk hill toward the farm. A single horse at this time of day always meant trouble...the men were in the fields and only vagabonds or bearers of bad tidings would be out in such filthy weather. She suddenly realised that she'd sliced through the gills and bone and without thinking through her finger. She screamed and ran to the jug of water and the china bowl ...she just stood there dripping blood into the bowl that slowly swirled and disappeared in the fresh water. She bit her lip. He was late..

The cook came into the room and seeing her away from her task scolded her then came and held her hand up and bound the cut and told her to hold the cut above her head. Her rough hands gripped

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her hand tightly as she stemmed the blood. She could smell the smoke of that morning's breakfast fire in her hair. They were both stood motionless as the latch was raised and the rider stumbled in, face red with exertion, and cried...the bridge has slid away with Tom and the cart on it...down by the weir...

He'd come to tell master..who hearing the commotion was clomping down the wooden stairs. She already knew...as the rain puddled on the stone floor, the red stain grew and eased into droplets of blood dripping into the wet floor and the fish leaked slowly into the bare wood of the table...she knew he was gone.. They stood motionless, all looking at each other, speechless and fearing the worst. The monkey screeching and jumping from the master's shoulder and freed by the commotion span and danced around the kitchen..chattering like a death rattle...screeching and chattering madly and spitting a grape seed into the fire..

