

Deirdre of the Sorrows and the End of the World

The day it starts, Malachi chases a bird out of his bookshop. He'll realize later that it was an owl - an omen, a wise-woman's bird - but while it happens he is most interested in stopping it from ravaging his bookshop.

The bird flaps around his head, and Malachi gives chase with a broom, following the bird out of the shop and halfway down the street. He returns to the bookshop breathing heavily, closes the door tightly against the winter chill and casts a despairing glance around the shop.

Malachi's bookshop is old: old enough to have sloping floors and thick-paned windows, short doorways, and ancient light fixtures that never work when you need them to. It's crowded with books with creaking spines and dusty pages that Malachi tries to keep organized, but there are never quite enough bookshelves.

Today, thanks to the owl, the mess is more pronounced than usual, and standing in the middle of it is a girl with bright green eyes. She is wearing a sweater that swallows her hands, and she looks guilty.

"Sorry about the mess."

Malachi straightens himself up, and puts the broom in the umbrella stand near the door. "It was that damned bird, there's no need to apologize."

She worries a ring threaded through her lip and ducks her head. "I just meant, I'm sorry the bird made a mess: he wasn't meant to."

Malachi smiles, and steps behind the counter. "No harm done. Can I help you?"

"Yes," she says slowly, "I'm looking for a map. Someone told me I might be able to find it here. You're Malachi, aren't you?"

He frowns. "Who wants to know?"

“That’s what they told me in Galway,” she says, playing with the frayed cuffs of her sweater. “They said, ‘go find Malachi in Dublin, he’s the man who knows where the map is’.”

“I have all sorts of maps,” Malachi tells her. “I’ve got a collection of nautical maps. And I’ve got a heap of atlases somewhere near the two-penny science fiction novels. And then road maps, of course, there’s a whole box of those somewhere, although most of them are out of date.”

“I’m looking for a map of somewhere in Wales,” she says, and looks at him like that’s supposed to mean something. Her eyes are too bright, and unnerving.

“Why don’t I dig out the road maps, and you can get started on those? There’s a table up front, if you want somewhere to sit.”

The table is covered in old newspapers and coffee mugs that he clears away hastily, while she traces a finger around the stains the mugs have left on the woof. “Do you eat breakfast here?”

“I do on Sundays,” he says, setting the box down. She dumps her parka on the ground beside the table, and smiles.

“That’s nice.”

He leaves her to it, and turns back to the mess that his scuffle with the bird had made. He picks up the papers first: bills and notices from departments with intimidating letterheads, telling him that he is too old and his business too fickle to survive in this cruel, grey city. The books are jumbled across the floor and he picks them up slowly, stacking them carefully on the proper shelves.

He’s been at it for a while when the girl joins him, getting on her hands and knees to collect a stack of books with bright covers. “I read these on a train once,” she says, handing them over to him. “They’re awful.”

“They may be,” he says, accepting another armful of books from her, “but they sell.” She scoffs, and goes back to picking up books. They work in silence, making short work of the rest of the books on the floor, and when she hands him the last few paperbacks, she apologizes again for the bird, and he waves it off.

“It’s not like you asked him to fly in here and knock all the books off the shelves,” and she shrugs and looks down at the scuffed toes of her boots. He smiles, wiping his hands on his trousers, “Do you want a coffee? I suppose you’ve earned it.” She tucks her hair behind her ears. Beneath the cuffs of her sweater, her wrists are far too thin. “I think I might make a sandwich too,” he says casually, “do you want one?”

She looks at him quickly, her eyes flashing, before shaking her head, and tugging her sweater down over her fingers. “No, I’m alright. Thank you.” She goes back to the maps.

He puts the kettle on and spoons instant coffee into two mugs, before pulling out a loaf of bread. He hesitates in front of his refrigerator before pulling out a block of cheese, and a small pot of mayonnaise. He cuts enough cheese for two sandwiches, and takes down two plates. He mixes the coffee, adding milk and sugar to his own, and pauses over the other cup, before leaving it black.

He brings everything into the front room on a tray, where she’s at the table, poring over a map in the pale afternoon light, and she tenses, but doesn’t look up when he sets the tray down on the table.

“Cup of coffee,” he says, sliding hers over. “I didn’t know you took it, so I left it black.”

She avoids his eyes and curls her fingers around the mug. “It’s good like this,” she assures him, and he smiles, pleased.

He pushes the sandwich over as well, and waves away her protests. “You helped me set the shop back to rights, the least I can do is make you lunch. It’s just got cheese on it, I haven’t gotten a chance to get groceries yet this week.”

Her fingers are tentative over the plate, and she thanks him very quietly.

“It’s so still in here,” she says, when the sandwiches have been eaten. “You can’t hear the city at all.”

“I always said that this was the street the world forgot,” Malachi says. “Dublin is full of streets like that, I suppose. Parks that are caught in the nineteenth century, and alleys that remain untouched by the twenty-first. Only problem is that it’s not very good for business.”

“How long have you had the shop?”

He sighs, “Too long. I keep losing parts of it. It used to be huge, and only sold books with gilt-edges.” He gestures, broadly. “You can see how we’ve fallen.”

“It’s not bad,” she says, shrugging, “I like it cluttered. It feels like you could find something really special here.”

“And have you?” He asks, nudging the pile of maps towards her. “What are you looking for, anyway?”

She shakes her head, “you wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“It’s in Wales though?”

“On the coast somewhere. Not too far from Cardiff, but that might be hearsay.”

“And someone in Galway told you that I might be able to find it for you, but you don’t think I’d believe you if you told me what you were looking for.”

She flushes a little. “I was hoping I would know it when I saw it, but it’s going to take some digging.”

“I’ll leave you to it, then.”

He takes the sandwich plates back to the kitchen and cleans them, then makes another pot of coffee, and refills both of their cups. He settles behind the counter with a book of accounts, and she rolls up her sleeves at the table by the window and opens another map.

The light fades slowly beneath the overcast sky, and dusk brings a squall of rain that rattles the door in its frame and wets the street in an instant. At six, Malachi closes his book and looks over to the table. She’s still poring over the maps, her coffee forgotten by her elbow, but after a minute, as if sensing that she’s being watched, she looks up at him.

“Are you closing for the day?” She asks, “When do you open tomorrow?”

“We open at eight,” he tells her, and she nods, standing stiffly and grabbing her jacket.

“I’ll be back, if that’s alright.”

She’s halfway out the door when he calls after her, “Do you have somewhere to stay?”

She freezes. “I’ll be fine.”

“So you don’t.”

“I’ll be fine,” she repeats. “Thank you for your help Mister...”

“Malachi, please,” he says, and walks towards the door. “I just meant... it’s cold out there. And there’s a couch in the back room you could stay on, if you want.”

She bites her lip. “You don’t even know my name.”

“You never offered it.”

“Aren’t you worried I’ll steal something?”

“I don’t have much to steal,” he admits. “Apart from a couple first editions, but those are locked up.”

“I could break the glass.”

“I’d hear it, and call the Garda.”

She looks confused by him, and he shrugs. “It’s cold out there tonight. And I’ve got a perfectly good couch.”

After a long moment, she nods, and pulls her hands out of her pockets. “I’m Deirdre.”

“That’s a nice name.” They shake, and she hovers in the doorway until he breaks the silence. “I was going to call for a takeaway for dinner,” he says. “Chinese sound alright?” She nods, and he smiles.

They eat dinner at the table, amidst heaps of maps. Afterwards, he reads, quietly, across from her, and she keeps scanning the maps, tracing her fingers up and down the curve of Welsh coastline. When it gets late, he finds a blanket and a pillow, and clears the couch of books. He bids her goodnight, and leaves her to her maps.

Malachi wakes slowly in the morning to bleak sunshine. He dresses, and walks into the kitchen to turn the kettle on before peeking into the bookshop. Deirdre is still asleep on the couch, nestled deep in the blankets.

He watches her sleep for a moment longer, and then pulls his coat on, leaving the bookshop quietly. He walks to the grocers’ briskly, and fills a basket with fresh fruit and vegetables, a carton of milk, and a loaf of fresh-baked bread. On the way back to the shop he stops at his favourite café and orders two coffees, and a small box of pastries.

When he returns he finds Deirdre sitting on the stoop, smoking a cigarette with her eyes closed. She opens them when she hears his footsteps, and smiles a little crookedly. “I thought I might have scared you off.”

“I just went to get breakfast.”

She stubs her cigarette out against the pavement, and follows him back inside. “You can’t keep buying me food,” she tells him. “I can’t pay you back.”

“I never had any grandchildren,” he tells her. “Let me pretend.”

She smiles at him, taking the cardboard cup of coffee when he hands it over, and wrapping grateful fingers around it. She’s less sharp in the morning, still half-asleep, and she tucks her knees against her chest when she sits.

They eat at the table, and he says: “I wish you’d tell me what you were looking for.”

“I’m looking for a map,” she says, peering at him over the edge of her coffee.

“I know that. I wish you’d tell me what it was of.”

“You wouldn’t believe me.”

“I might, you never know.”

She studies him for a moment, and then sets down her coffee, and steeple her fingers.

“You really want to know? It’s a strange story.”

“Those are the best kinds of stories,” he says, crossing his arms. “Tell me.”

She hesitates and then rolls up the sleeve of her sweater, and stretches her bare arm across the table between them. She has a tattoo that runs from her wrist to her elbow, of a woman weeping. It’s done in the style of a Virgin Mary, with a woman in a long cloak, a crown and a halo, but her mouth has been sewn shut, and the heart she holds in her hands has been pierced with many swords, and is bleeding.

“She’s Our Lady of Sorrows,” she tells him. “Because I’m Deirdre, you know? Deirdre of the Sorrows. You know the story, right?”

“It’s a legend, isn’t it? An old, Irish tale.” Malachi murmurs, unable to draw his eyes from the wretched expression on the face of the tattooed woman. “The young girl who was cursed?”

“They said she was like Helen of Troy,” Deirdre says, bitterly. “That her beauty would drive men to war. The king had her hidden away when she was born, so he could marry her when she was old enough, but she escaped. She lived abroad for many years, and returned to Ireland on the king’s assurance that she would be protected. But he lied, and he killed her lover and all of his men.” She curls her hand into a fist, and the chest of the tattooed woman seems to heave. “You know how the story ends?”

“She’s killed, isn’t she?”

“In the story, she allows herself to be killed. But in truth, she ran. They wanted Deirdre to be the patron saint of destinies, but she escaped. She ran away and she kept running, and the reluctant patron of destiny became the saint of sorrows.”

“And what does all that have to do with a map?”

“They let Deirdre go, but they punished her with immortality. An eternity awake. To the point where she wished she had stayed in her story to die. Until last year there was a rumour in Galway, about a man who knew of a map of the end of the world. And if you could get to the end of the world, there was a woman who knew the way out of it, and you could finally rest.”

Malachi stares at her, and Deirdre runs a hand through her dark hair. “It’s me. I’m Deirdre. And I’ve been waiting for centuries. That’s why I came to your bookshop. Because someone told me you might know of a map of the way out.”

Malachi takes a moment to breathe. Across from him, Deirdre subsides in her chair, and picks up her coffee again. “I can go if you want,” she tells him after a few minutes of silence. “I don’t mean you any harm.”

“No, no.” Malachi says. “It’s just... if you had told me what map you needed in the first place, I might have been able to make your search easier.”

“You know what I’m talking about?”

“I think I do, yes. But the map isn’t here, it’s at the university.”

“Could you get it for me?” Deirdre asks. Malachi looks at her. She is too thin beneath the collar of her sweater. Her arm is inked with the memory of the past, and she is on the run from her own story.

“I think I can, yes.”

The map is in Trinity College, tucked away in one of the libraries. When he finds it again, in a dusty library on the top floor of one of the buildings, it is tucked deep in the back of a heavy book. He tucks it into his coat, and walks out.

Deirdre, who is leaning against a wall near the entrance to the library straightens abruptly, dislodging a handful of nearby pigeons. Malachi winks at her, and taps his lapel.

“Why are we walking so quickly?” She asks. “We’ve got it now, I want to see it.”

“And you will, once we’re out of sight.”

She gapes at him. “You didn’t... did you steal it?”

“I don’t see why else anyone would need to see it. And it would have taken too long to copy.”

Malachi locks the bookshop once they get back, and Deirdre takes the map and spreads it out over the stained wood of the table.

“Wales,” she says, “I knew it. Near Rhyl. In a forest, on the coast.”

“There’s a ferry you can take from Dublin to Holyhead,” Malachi says, slowly. “And a train from there. It shouldn’t take more than a day.”

“I’ve waited centuries, I’m sure I can handle one more day.” She reaches for the map, and he stops her.

“I’m going with you.”

“What? No.”

“You need someone to look out for you.”

“I’ve been looking out for myself for years, and I’ve done just fine.”

“This is different.”

“This is Wales!” She exclaims. “It’s a ferry and a train. I’ve escaped death and destiny, I’m sure I can handle a train.”

“This is the end of the world,” he tells her. “Don’t you want someone there to hold your hand?”

“I don’t need anyone to hold my hand.”

“Bit of company, then? On the train?”

She cuts a look at him, sharp and bright green, and sighs. “Fine.”

“Brilliant,” he smiles. “We’ll leave first thing.”

They take a bus to the docks, and board a sleek, white ferry; a boat so large that the ocean seems to disappear beneath it. Malachi goes to buy them coffee, and when he finds Deirdre again, she’s out on the deck, watching the sea, with a cigarette dangling idly between her fingers. The wind is playing chaos with her hair, which streams magnificently over her shoulders. She cuts a stark figure against the grey sky, and when he joins her at the railing, she points at the dark mass of land rising out of the horizon. The end of the world.

After the ferry they take a train, where they find an empty car and watch the country race by.

“Have you thought about what it means,” Malachi asks, “that you’ll finally be able to... to not be?”

“I’ve been thinking about it for most of my life.”

“Are you ready for it?”

“I’ve spent my life running. This is all I’ve ever wanted.”

“You must have been across the world,” he says, quietly.

“I have.”

“What did you like best?”

She smiles, and looks out of the window. “I always liked New York. The only way to live there is to give yourself up to the city. No one questions you. I like that.”

“Why did you ever come back?”

“I got too attached.”

“To the city?”

“To the city,” she says quietly, “and there was a boy. What about you? Have you thought about what you’re walking into?”

“I’ve run that bookshop for three decades now. I wash my hands of it.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

She laughs, and pushes up her sleeves. He points at her tattoo: “where did you get that done?”

“Brazil. Sao Paolo.”

“Brazil,” he whistles. “Did it hurt?”

“Not too much. I had a bit to drink before I went to get it done.”

He chuckles.

“Where’s the most exotic place you’ve ever been?” She asks, the train quiet beneath them.

“Went to Paris once,” he tells her, “when I was much, much younger.”

“Did you go with anyone?”

“A very wonderful girl, yes.”

“What happened to her?”

He shrugs. “She found someone better. Such is life.”

She pats his arm, carefully. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was a long time ago.”

The town they arrive in is small, and closed for the winter. It has a pier that stretches out into the fitful sea, with the cold skeleton of a rollercoaster on the end of it. They find a small café to warm up in, with greasy fried fish and chips. There are two women behind the counter, and they speak to each other in Welsh, a low rhythmic hum in the background as Malachi spreads the map out on the table between small bottles of salt and vinegar.

“We’re looking for a grove of yew trees,” he tells her, and Deirdre raises an eyebrow at him, dabbing a chip in the puddle of vinegar.

“You’re awfully excited about this,” she says.

“I haven’t had this much fun in a long time,” he tells her. “I always thought that there were all sorts of grand adventures waiting for me, but I never actually had any. That damned owl in the shop and this trip are the most fun I’ve had in years.”

“I’m glad you’re having fun,” she says. “What do yew trees look like?”

“Yew trees look like they could hold a conversation with you,” he says. “They grow to be absolutely enormous. Straight out of legends.”

Deirdre frowns, and turns back to her fish and chips. Malachi watches her for a minute, and then asks, quietly, “Are you nervous?”

“No,” she snaps, “No, it’s just,” she sighs. “It’s just that it’s a little unsettling. End of the world, you know? And we’re sitting in bloody Wales, eating fish and chips and discussing yew trees.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Malachi asks. “It’s a comfortable sort of adventure.”

“It’s just that I was expecting the whole thing to be a bit more esoteric,” she says. “I never thought I’d be alive for so long. But I just kept waking up, day after day after day. And I couldn’t find this map and the years just kept ticking by, and ticking by, and I wasn’t getting any older, but everything kept changing.”

She leans forward, and looks him straight in the eye. “I’ve seen everything. Can you even begin to imagine that? I’ve seen cities built, and I’ve seen wars, and the world just keeps rushing forward. I used to really believe that I would find a way out, but that was back before trains and ferries and all of this, that was back when the forests were thick and the lights were dim, and it was easier to believe that if you walked down the wrong road at the wrong time of night you’d fall off the edge of the earth, or the Good Folk would find you and make you dance with them.”

She spreads her hands. “But now? Now, there’s fish and chips and a bookshop owner, and I just can’t make myself believe that finding a grove of yew trees is going to find me what I want. This world stopped believing in sacred places a long time ago. What if we find it, and it just doesn’t work anymore?”

“I don’t think that’s how magic works,” Malachi says, hesitantly.

“What do you know about magic? You own a bookshop.”

“And what is more magic than a book? Didn’t you ever wonder how I managed to get my hands on this map?”

“Of course, I just figured it was dumb luck.”

“I got this map because I believe. And because I’ve never been smart enough to stop believing in things, even when everyone else says that they’re impossible. Years ago, I met a man who told me that he had an impossible secret. He asked if I wanted to know what it was, and I said that of course I did. And he told me, and I believed him. And because I believed him, he gave me the map for safe-keeping. And I hid it and I knew that even if someone else found it, they wouldn’t believe that it was what it claimed to be. It was just waiting for someone who needed it. You.”

Deirdre nods, tucking the last bit of her fried cod into her mouth. “Come on, then.”

They find the grove of yew trees amidst a flurry of snow. “This is the one!” Malachi calls, pointing at the shadowed copse of trees up ahead.

“You said that last time, and then we nearly fell in a bog!” Deirdre calls back, her cheeks red with cold.

“I’ve got it right this time!”

“Malachi!” Deirdre shouts, and he turns to look at her, already two trees deep into the grove. “Malachi, I swear to god, if you’re just leading us on a wild goose chase...”

Malachi, feeling more alive than he has in years, grins wildly at her. “Which god?” He calls back, and then steps sideways, and disappears.

Deirdre, although she will never admit it, screams.

She struggles over the last, uneven bit of ground to the grove, and steps into it slowly. Beneath the outstretched arms of the trees the wind dies away, and she pushes her tousled hair out of her eyes.

“Hello?” She calls, “Malachi!”

The trees whisper back at her, the sturdiness of their trunks beckoning her forward. “Right,” she says, and moves forward slowly. The tree that Malachi was standing next to when he disappeared is huge; ancient. Its trunk is thick and craggy and she touches a dip in the bark reverently. “Just stand here?” She murmurs, and takes a deep breath, clenching her hands into fists, “just stand here, and step?” She takes one short step to the right, and there is a sudden swoop in her stomach and she falls right out of the grove.

There are cliffs at the end of the world. Deirdre’s breath is knocked back into her lungs where she stands, and she presses a hand against her throat, gasping in the cold air, and looking for Malachi. He’s behind her, staring out at the cliffs, which rise proudly above an unfamiliar ocean.

Deirdre catches up with him, and takes his arm. His eyes are bright with the cold. “It’s amazing, isn’t it?”

Deirdre takes a long breath and lets it out slowly. “It is.”

It looks like the way the world used to look. All steep cliffs and gnarled trees, empty spaces, and potential in the deep, green grass. Farther along the cliffs is an old cathedral. It’s in ruins: stony guts scattered everywhere and rubbed smooth. There is half an arch over the entrance, and a woman in a robe the colour of stone standing beneath it.

She welcomes them with a warm stew, served in rough bowls. Later, Malachi will think that the stew tasted a bit like the wine he drank in Paris. Deirdre remembers it tasting like the ethnic food she ate one breathless night in New York City, watching the sun rise over the Hudson.

The stew casts a heaviness over Deirdre's limbs, and she slumps in her seat, struggling to keep her eyes open. Malachi's worried hands press against her pale cheeks, and her forehead, then dart to her wrist, feeling for a pulse beneath the dark ink of her tattoo.

"Enough," the woman says, in a voice as soft as the wind and Malachi's hands, cupped around Deirdre's, fall away. "This is why you came to me." Malachi folds his hands, and looks up when the woman hoots like an owl. There is a returning call, and a soft sweep of wings against Malachi's cheeks, wiping them dry.

Malachi helps the woman lay Deirdre out at the edge of the cliffs, and, lacking flowers, picks a bouquet of lichen and arranges it on her chest.

The funeral is quiet: they are the only mourners. When it is over, and Deirdre is buried, the woman turns Malachi's map over and draws a new one for him, in ink made of tree bark and rock dust. She takes him to the edge of the cliffs at night, and teaches him the unfamiliar patterns of the stars overhead.

"The future," she tells him, "lies that way."

He follows the line of her arm with his eyes, and tucks the map into his pocket.

"An adventure?" He touches the rosette crafted from a ragged piece of sweater that he's pinned to his lapel. "I always wanted to have one of those."