

A Sad Tale's Best for Winter

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Grief. Fear. Lust. Hope.

A mother with a dying child. A king on the eve of war. Endless motivations drive endless petitioners to me. Day after day, story after story, they seek me in greedy waves, for I am the great Oracle at Delphi, Apollo's Pythia, His mouthpiece on Earth. Listen closely for my tenure teaches much: those who seek me may carry endless motivations, bring varied prayers, but in the end, they all ask the same question — how can I cheat.

If you're going to write this saga, get that part right.

Oh, I hear the scandal of my words. Just imagine how the mother or king would rail, being called a cheat by Apollo's high priestess. Most have no idea they're cheaters, mind you, so wrapped up in their nobleness they are, so bathed in the preciousness of their quest. They have come to save a life, a kingdom! They seek the truth — nay, grander — Truth itself! Sounds valiant, yes — to seek Truth?

But that's the problem. They all claim to seek Truth, but I've never beheld one who's meant it. No, they just want to double-cross the stars, wheedle a

different result from the three Sisters, the blind Moirai, who spin and measure and cut Fate for us all.

The mother? She wants reprieve not Truth. The king, approval of his hubris.

I see them plainly for the Sisters reveal portions of the spool to me. From what I've seen, I assure you, no one — not even you with your wide eyes and open questions — seeks Truth because Truth is the one thing that cannot be altered. Truth kills options, denies choice, because they are illusions, mere shadows, while Truth is pure light.

Fifty-seven moons have waned since I became the Oracle. Each one erases a bit more of me, takes more memories from me. A distinction without a difference, perhaps. We're all just walking collections of what's happened to us, after all. We are but jumbles of the past cast in present tense.

But you've come for a story — I know, I know — and a story you shall have.

Fifty-seven moons ago, high priest Agathon comes for me at my brother's house. The morning is so new to spring that winter's chill still crisps the air. Cymbals begin clanging on the temple mount at dawn. Ethereally soft at first, the din grows with the sun.

A procession — by Apollo! — the priests are coming. Our house buzzes like a kicked hive, we rush about so. It isn't a festival day, so the procession can only signal one thing: Apollo has selected a new Pythia. The priests are coming to fetch her. Oh, the wonder of it! Our village lies nestled in a forgotten valley of ancient, knotty olive groves near the base of the temple mount. Despite our proximity, we rarely produce the Pythia. The last time, my hair still held an umber hue.

My brother Hilarion and his grown sons stand outside our walls while I vie with the other women for a glimpse over the gate. Agathon struts proudly at the head of an undulating column of priests. The rising light behind him sets his white hair aglow as if he were the Sun God himself. Behind him, priests wave laurel branches, play cymbals. Those at the rear chant honey-voiced odes to Apollo: “Oh, Delian king whose illuminating eye sees all, both without and within” and such.

By the Sisters, I swear to you it did not occur to me they were coming for me. Me — the spinster — burden to her father, then her brother. Me — with the limp, the gimpy right foot which strips me of the dignity helpful chores purchase. Me — who is so buried in my brother's house that I doubt our neighbors can still

recall my face. Me — expect to be Apollo's new bride? Never. Surely, Apollo does not even know my name.

Yet, here Agathon is, stopping resolutely at our gate. His voice thunders, "Hilarion, son of Chariton, mighty Apollo's Oracle must be renewed. He seeks one pure of heart to be His Pythia, His ancient bride. Today, He calls your sister, Legeia. The Oracle calls her for she is the Oracle."

My cheeks burn as if Agathon's words are fire, his invocation a brand. I, Apollo's mouthpiece, His sibyl? My knees shake me to the ground. My hands splay into cold, chalky earth. An honor beyond any hope. Time turns in on itself as my new life unfolds in my mind's eye. I am delivered. Born anew, free from shame, free of familial debts I cannot repay. I am to be useful, a burden no longer. More than useful, I will serve as a bridge to the worlds which surround us but which we cannot see. History will quiver at my every word. My name, Legeia, which means "clear-voiced," finally makes sense. Has it been an omen, my destiny, all along? I, who am always silent, so compliant, will now have the mightiest voice in the world. I believe I can hear the Sisters unspool a glorious, golden thread just for me.

What a joke! The prideful cannot sense the Three. I know that now.

Much of that morning mists in memory. Excited murmurs. The creak of the main gate opening. Hands on my head. An arm lifting me up. Children clapping. Olive branches strewn about my feet. The smell of laurel burning. At one point, my brother and I face each other. I can't hear his words, but his eyes speak plainly. They are all relief. His whole body one long exhale, the sigh of a freed man. No more spinster sister to feed. No more arguments with his wife over cramped spaces or conflicting loyalties. He asks no questions of Agathon, not whether he can visit me, nor how he can learn if I am well.

Just as Agathon hoped, I assure you.

You're starting to suspect, I hope, that a trick is coming, that my redemption is too sweet to be true. Agathon means "the good," you know. I can only assume his mother meant it ironically.

"Leave all your possessions and follow Apollo," Agathon bids me. And I do. Just like that. It's not like I have much to leave, of course, although I regret not grabbing my mother's comb. Something of hers would be nice to hold today.

Fifty-seven moons. It's winter once again. Less and less of me remains with each waning, and now here I am as you see. Stooped frame, heavy-lidded eyes lined with the magic of ancient wisdom they still struggle to see clearly.

I think where you're from, I'd be called a "witch." I like that term. Sounds more powerful, like I'm the one in control.

Days blur more and more. Sleep lives in me longer, feeds on my marrow. It's the fumes from the fissure, I'm sure of it. They destroy, speed decay. It's why we Oracles have to be replaced so often. Even sifting through these memories with you makes me weary. And the headaches grow more intense. I can see the rainbow in white light, just on the edges, all the time now. It's always there, but brightest when I close my eyes. And the headaches. They have always crippled after a trance, but now they last into the night, the next day. Or maybe it's all a trance now? I wonder how I would know the difference.

Well, it doesn't matter. There's no reason to save my strength any longer. My last energies can safely pour into my story today, because I saw the priests gathering their cymbals and laurel earlier. And, well, let's just say, tomorrow's not a festival day.

My tenure will overlap the new Pythia's for one afternoon. She will meet me as briefly as I met my predecessor, sitting side by side before the natural chasm in the temple floor, that cruel fissure that birthed this whole nightmare.

I remember being fascinated by the vapors rising from the floor that first day. The gas, is it really the decaying bones of a serpent slain by Apollo as myth

instructs? Wonder pulses through me. The Pythia sits silent, motionless beside me. Her limbs frail, body shrunken. She whispers in a hollow, broken tone, “The Sun scorches, but the Blind see – find comfort in them.” I have no chance to ask her meaning because Agathon appears with a legion of priests to begin the transformation ceremony.

Temple ceremonies are secret, of course, known only to initiates, but advanced warning could not have prepared me. It begins innocently enough with incense and chanting. The pomp thrills. The Pythia and I are led to stand face-to-face, one on either side of the fissure. Agathon stands behind the Pythia and removes the long, white veil which covers her from head to toe. He brings it to me. As he drapes the veil over my crown, two priests seize the Pythia by the arms and drag her to Apollo's altar. Agathon holds my arms as I watch in horror. The priests slit her jugular as if she were a ram or a common goat. Her veins still gushing, they lug her throbbing corpse toward a door in the floor and sling her there like waste to the heap. Limp and hanging by Agathon's hands, I scream, or I must have, because he says calmly, “Pythia, save your holy cries for prophesy. Her bones will mix forever with those before her, as Apollo wills it.”

As Apollo wills it!

Agathon's voice is all business, so matter of fact. My eyes bulge, temples pound. Nausea has me, twists me. My brain reels from the shock. "Why" is the only word I can form. Why, why, why — under His blessed sun — would Apollo require the sacrifice of an old woman?

The answer is He doesn't. In fact, I'm not certain Apollo even knows He has a temple at Delphi, that's how holy this place is.

Later, when my cheeks are tight with drying tears, and my eyes burn for the salt, questions flow in my mind. The bones of how many Pythia lay beneath the temple? Do they decay or do they form its very foundation? Why doesn't someone — from the villages, from Athens, Sparta, or better yet, Olympus — do anything to stop this barbarism? Do they even know? This last question never fully forms for I know they do not. The worst realization — the one which pulls my stomach to my toes — is that my bones will be shucked aside in the same way when my time comes. This is when I first sense the Three, that broken moment. They rock me sweetly like a mother would a babe, hold me to their empyrean bosoms while I shiver at the horror of this place and howl that it's not a temple, but a tomb.

Oh, I won't harp on all the ways this place and its priests have appalled me, disappointed me, reduced me. It's rather maudlin to hear a wide-eyed idealist

recount how she's been had. What still stings though is that I should have seen it coming. Because, you see, Truth doesn't want to hide. It wishes to be found. You need merely ask the right questions.

My childhood is spent in the foothills of this place. My family, those in our village, no one has a closer seat, a better chance to see the reality of this place. But do we ever question the rightness of it? We live meagerly, barely eke out a living from our olive groves, trade as best we can with the sea villages which dot the craggy coast. We are poor. But the temple? It's encrusted with gold and ivory, not just the statues, but every surface. When in the history of the world has such wealth been garnered, so much power been welded, without a dirty trick or a con behind it? Yet, never have I heard anyone question the disparity in our means and the plenty on their table. Never. Because this is Apollo's own home, we believe.

And look at the great men — kings even! — the multitude of souls who brave mountains or cross Poseidon's realm to come here for the Oracle. The wealth, the popularity, surely these are signs of Apollo's favor. The myths must be true for look at how Apollo rewards His faithful. That's why it's right that the priests live as plushly as they do, and we but yearn. We make these conclusions all on our own, accept the prompts the priest provide, and hang ourselves with our own untested assumptions.

Like all great cons, the lie is built on something real. There is a gas fissure, a small, natural vent in the mountain. The gas does transport the mind. It should be the greatest gift to mankind. It's wisdom should flow freely — for free — and help each one of us accept the Fate we're cut. Yet, none of us ever asks why it makes sense that the priests charge us to hear prophecies from our own deity about our own lives.

And the myth of the Pythia, that she is always an old woman “pure of heart.” I grew up hearing it, idolizing the idea. Such a precious image, Apollo marries an ancient virgin and grants her some of His divine sight. Now I see it's merely a precious ruse for able-bodied men to use up the body of a woman for profit, the oldest trick there is. “Pure of heart” is merely code for “unmarried,” you see. The Pythia must be an old, unmarried woman, one who is inherently vulnerable. She is a spinster, a crone, a drain on her family who surely wants rid of her and won't ask questions. And so she can be drugged until she is spent. Obviously, she can't just retire, she knows too much, so off to the heap with her. All for the sake of a divine show that makes a handful of priests some of the richest and most powerful men in the world. If it weren't for the Three, who've so graciously claimed me, I swear to you I would go mad.

But I digress. Let's get to the story you've asked to hear.

Today's petitions start with mundane questions, the usual parade of denial. A goat herder who doesn't want to see his father has stolen from him. A Spartan nurse who doesn't want to admit she loves her mistress. Petitioner after petitioner, the vapors waft in me, through me or I through them. It's hard to tell sometimes. Then, as the sun begins to sink, as the great metal doors are closing, two messengers sprint up the stairs. So earnest are they that I wonder whether their intentions may be true. I have always wanted to hear an honest inquiry, the right question.

Now I know they were my last chance.

The pair wear identical tunics and waxed-leather sandals, dyed to match the wine-dark sea. Royal Sicilian guard, obviously. The older one introduces himself as "Cleomenes." The younger remains silent, hefting a goat over his shoulders. They come prepared. Encouraging.

Although it is late, the priest at the door bids them enter. Royal petitions usually garner sacks of coins. They take priority. Agathon himself stands in the center of the antechamber and motions for Cleomenes to sit.

"Cleomenes of Sicilia, and your companion —" Agathon pauses until Cleomenes says in a reverent tone, "Dion, your Eminence."

“Dion,” Agathon repeats. “Please, won’t you both sit and tell us the news of Sicilia while my brothers prepare your worthy sacrifice.” The goat is led through a side door, and the pair sit with Agathon under the round ivory and gold dome designed to do precisely what it is doing to these messengers, awe. Heads bowed, words hushed, their story quickly bubbles.

“All is well in Sicilia, generally, your Eminence,” Cleomenes begins nervously. “Except that King Leontes believes Queen Hermione has been unfaithful with his dear friend Polixenes, the king of Bohemia, who has resided at our court this year — most happily, until now.”

Agathon nods along attentively. His nod can prompt even the most reluctant to speak, which would be impressive if he weren’t so oily. All these years and no one’s yet realized that Agathon so thoroughly pumps petitioners for information that my work is nearly done before I begin. Helps the priests get a jump on writing the prophecy, you see. A little logic, plus the gist of my ravings, add to that some poetic meter and — lo! — Apollo has spoken.

“The queen’s due to give birth any day now. The king doubts he’s the father.”

“Because — ” Agathon’s voice trails, ending in another nod.

“Dion and I can't figure it out. The queen is true. Everyone says so. The king seems to have plucked his fears from the stars.” Cleomenes regards the temple dome a moment before continuing. “The king confided his theory to our captain, Camillo, who's a true nobleman if ever there were. Camillo argued for the queen, but king would have none of it. The king,” Cleomenes leans forward, whispering now, “we fear he's gone mad. He ordered Camillo to kill King Polixenes, his oldest friend. But Camillo's just too good, you see. Instead, he told King Polixenes about the plot and then helped him escape in the dead of night. When the king discovered both Camillo and King Polixenes missing, he was angrier than I've ever seen him, which is saying something. He blamed it all on Queen Hermione, said she plotted to kill him too.”

I lean forward, closer to the screen that separates me from the group. I must have have misheard that last bit as it makes no earthly sense. Agathon apparently agrees because he asks, “Why would your king think his queen conspired to kill him? I do not see it.”

“That's just the thing, your Eminence. None of us at court can understand it. But I was there. It happened precisely as I say. Upon hearing that Camillo and King Polixenes had left, King Leontes turned to his queen and accused her of

conspiring with them to kill him. He charged her with adultery — and treason. Jailed her right then and there, no matter that she's long with child. It was lunacy.”

Agathon glances back at the screen where I hide, as if I need prompting to mark important details. Here are two trusted guards — and they must be very trusted to have been selected to come here — who believe the innocence of another king over their own. Unusual. Very unusual. Of the two allegations against the queen, treason and adultery, treason seems rather far-fetched. It's far more likely the king's gone mad. But adultery. That is a different matter. If the queen has been unfaithful with King Polixenes, that would go a long way in explaining why King Leontes has lost his mind.

Agathon interjects, “And the queen. She is with child. Her first?”

“No, your Eminence,” replies Cleomenes. “Her second. Her first, Prince Mamillius, is now eight, although he's like to die, taken gravely ill the day his mother's imprisoned.”

That's interesting. Sicilia's heir presumptive is dying. And a seven year spread between children? That's quite a gap in time. Fertility issues? Estrangement? Hard to say. By the way Agathon wrings his beard, I know he sees it too. Polixenes's visit was lengthy, the messengers report, and happy. Well,

maybe a little too happy. Idle time and adultery are always fast friends. The work before me is clear. Cleomenes need only ask the right question to learn Truth.

Agathon stands and nods to the priest in the back. The inner chamber door slowly opens to reveal me veiled from head to toe. Agathon says in his reverent baritone, “Men of Sicilia, stand before the oracle of Apollo. Ask your questions plainly. Speak well.”

Cleomenes's voice shakes as he speaks, “Great Apollo, our King Leontes asks You three questions. The first, is Queen Hermione loyal to her king, or second, is Polixenes at fault? And third, is the great Camillo of Sicilia a loyal servant?”

The moment Cleomenes utters, “or second,” I sigh. Conjoined questions are always the wrong question, too easy to conflate meaning. These Sicilians don't want Truth. They are just like everyone else. The right question — Who is the father of Hermione's baby? — is so simple, just a few words long, but fear controls their tongues. These messengers don't really care who fathered the child. They just want their old lives back — Cleomenes's voice bares this wish plainly when he talks about his beloved captain, Camillo — so they ask the questions most likely to return the status quo. Understandable, I suppose, but weak.

Agathon motions for the laurel and oleander incense to be lit. Its familiar, woody smell quickly fills the inner rotunda. A priest leads me to a tripod chair which straddles the fissure. Seated, I can smell the musky fumes from the fissure as well now. Another priest positions the incense bowl so closely to my face that I can't help but inhale. It burns the back of my throat. My limbs begin to shake, my torso gyrates.

The natural gas is what spurs my visions, but it isn't what makes me shake and convulse, by the way. Took me awhile to understand that. It's the oleander that does, a touch by the priests to insure the petitioners get a good show.

While I shake and moan, a priest ushers the gobsmacked Sicilians toward the outer chamber, told they must leave so "Apollo can take her," which is a complete joke. Visions are obviously gifts from the Three, not Apollo, for it's not the minotaur who knows the secrets of the labyrinth, but the architects. The Sicilian guards leave without a hint of a question on their faces. Like all the others, they just accept they're not allowed to witness my divine trance, which makes it too easy for the priests to be the sole recipient of Truth. They need only answer the questions asked, and of course, the questions are always the wrong ones. So the petitioners are merely given what crumbs the priests choose to discard. There is as

much power in hiding as revealing, after all. Sometimes more. All that gold and ivory didn't attach itself to the temple walls, remember?

Nausea ripples through me. The Three draw near. I can't tell if I am floating or swimming or just upside down. Then from nothing, a white light flashes so brightly that its afterimage glows brighter than daylight. They are here, my beloved Sisters! My body seizes, draws upward. Warm now, I float through them, among them, betwixt their loving arms. The softness of their airy forms comforts and lulls. I hear the spinning of the wheel, the swoosh of the blade. As the afterimage spots fade from my eyes, a vision crystallizes against a solid black landscape.

Behold!

A gold thread lies across my hands, inside of which I see a party. At long tables with meats and fruits aplenty, sit the finest of a realm. Servant girls dance. All in attendance don masks. A classic bacchanal. Then, the scene shifts. I see a pair cross on a lonely, stone stairway. They think they recognize each other. They are wrong. He is a king, but not her husband. She is royal, but much higher in rank than the lady-in-waiting he believes her to be. He pulls her to him. Bodies press fast, press hard. Their minds hold nothing but fleshy pleasure. There will be a child, a girl.

I remember little after that. The heartbreak of the Three leaving me once more. The itch of my coarsely woven pallet as I regain consciousness. The pounding of my head as if Hephaestus himself has struck me. But what is clear is that I have witnessed Polixenes and Hermione's union. They are guilty and yet innocent. Ah, but what do the priests tell the unsuspecting Sicilian guards? Let me recount it for you:

Hermione is chaste; Polixenes blameless;
Camillo a true subject; Leontes a jealous tyrant;
his innocent babe truly begotten;
and the king shall live without an heir, if that which is lost be not found.

Fascinating, isn't it, how the priests twist Truth? Lie without lying. The first line is a cruel trick, no? Hermione is chaste in her own mind only. Polixenes blameless? Technically. The second line, the bit about Camillo. Well, the guards certainly want to hear that. Maybe it's even true. Certainly the king sounds like he's taken a tyrannical turn, but it's interesting that the whole second line comes from the story the Sicilians told, not my vision. Give the people a bit of what want, eh? Builds credibility, and this temple has a reputation to maintain.

The third line, the innocent babe? Well, all babes are innocent, no? But innocently begotten, truly begotten? Again, technically. But the last line — that's classic Agathon. The king's heir will likely die. The guards made that plain. And

now, thanks to this prophesy, the king will start a quest — a quest which will surely send him back here several times at great expense, I'll wager — to find something lost, which the best type of quest, really, one so vague that the quester may define it however he wishes, especially since everyone has lost something dear.

And now we come to it, the part where I need you. You will leave this place. I will not. Write my story instead of the one you intend. Do your audiences really need another comic romp through mistaken identities? Tell the world how the Oracle really works. How it controls all our lives. Or at least tell the story of Queen Hermione — the true story of her innocent mistake. Don't let a child grow up confused about who her parents are. Keep her from marrying a half-brother or a cousin or such. You'd be surprised how often that happens.

If you don't, Agathon wins. Information is power, and this temple is never weak. The true story of these poor Sicilians will rear its head someday, somehow, and I promise you the priests will find a way to profit from it. Two kingdoms involved in a scandal this big? I assure you, Agathon sees nothing but gold. But you can fix this. Write my story, not their prophecy. Reveal Truth.

I know Apate has you. I can see that trickster goddess laughing through your eyes. She's been there the whole time. I see you. You've your own scheme

to hide Truth, I know. You're famous for it. The chaos of incomplete prophecy, the literary virtue of misunderstanding. And the cheaters love you for it. I understand, I do. But you cannot have been sent to me by accident on this my last day. The Three would not be so cruel. So cast your tricks aside and tell an old woman's story.

Author's note: Both the title and prophecy in verse are taken from Shakespeare's "A Winter's Tale."