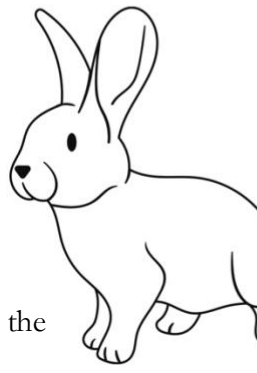


The White Hare

by Carys Crossen



The smoke tainted every lungful of air, making breathing a battle. The fire was seething, the gorse and heather desiccated after weeks without rain. The firefighters had been forced to retreat for the night, unable to find their way in the smoke and the haze and the gloom. The heat made the air quiver, smudging the outlines of the full moon that had risen to gaze dispassionately on the chaos.

Rhiannon wasn't nearly so composed. Her eyes were stinging, all tears dried out, and her nose was twitching madly, tickled by the ash. She leapt ahead of the flames, which inched forward steadily, a caterpillar munching on the grasses.

The moors, her moors, her beloved home, were being razed to dust and to ash. Her eyes glowed, the fire within reflecting the fire without and she laid her long ears along her back and fled.

No one saw her. One exhausted firefighter, trudging downhill for a breather, caught a glimpse of something white, flickering in the corner of his vision. But when he turned, there was only the smoke drifting by.

Rhiannon headed for safety, one thought and one thought only forming in her mind.

Vengeance.

#

The magpies knew how the fire started. They were as wise as any owl, and more cunning even than the ravens. Although they seldom lingered on the moors, preferring the hustle and bustle of even the smallest towns, there was nothing that transpired that the magpies didn't know about.

Rhiannon sought out Skadi, a local magpie whom she'd dealt with on several occasions. She always compensated Skadi well for information. But shortly after meeting her and uttering the

customary ‘devil, devil, I defy thee,’ Rhiannon realised Skadi would gladly have spoken with her for nothing, let alone the meat and cheese she’d brought. The magpie was even jumpier than usual. The great fire on the moors had rattled even the hardest of them.

Skadi told her what she knew.

Boys, four of them, up on the moors. Bored and intent on mischief, they had started a fire, tossing on random bits of rubbish and savouring the recklessness of the act. Then the fire had turned on them, gobbling up rubbish, grasses, and dried sticks, refusing to be stamped out. They had fled, cursing, determined never to be caught and punished for their misdeed.

Could Skadi tell Rhiannon their names?

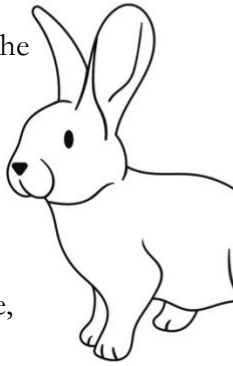
Of course, Skadi could. And she did.

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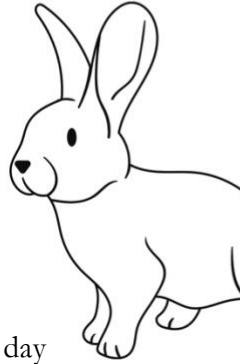
The moon that had gazed down upon the fire was the Strawberry Moon. Rhiannon silently promised mighty Hecate that by the time the moon swelled again, into the Buck Moon, the moors and all who lived upon them would be avenged. Rhiannon had her methods, unorthodox though they were, of giving people what they deserved. The moon was a powerful ally, and if Rhiannon kept her promise, the moon would lend its power to her cause.

Accordingly, she decided to devote seven days to each boy, and ensure that her promise was kept within the lunar cycle. She began with the ringleader, a tall boy named Ryan who had long ago realised that a cast iron sense of his own self-importance compensated for a myriad of deficiencies. His only loves were himself and football.

On Monday, Ryan saw what he thought was a white rabbit sitting in his front garden. He threw a handy stone at it and sniggered as it loped through the hedge.



Bad luck followed at his heels like an unwanted dog all week. His new football boots vanished from his locker and were never seen again. When he hoofed the ball during break it smashed straight through the window of the biology lab and he was stuck with a week of detention. His Mum stuffed his prized Arsenal strip into a charity bag for no apparent reason, prompting a ferocious family row and an atmosphere you could cut with a knife. His Dad forbade him from watching the match.



Finally, out of nowhere, weedy little Sam Spencer, the place-filler for the school football team, figured out where the back of the net was. He scored six goals in PE on Thursday, five the day after. Ryan found himself comprehensively outplayed at practice on Saturday. Everyone knew he'd get benched for the big game on Tuesday.

As Ryan stomped home on Saturday, fuming, he saw the white rabbit again. It darted across the road in front of him, scaring him out of his sulk. Seeing its long, long legs, Ryan realised it wasn't a rabbit, but a hare. A white hare, pale and ominous. He told himself not to be daft, that it was only a stupid bunny.

He ran the rest of the way back to his house, the crescent moon staring icily down at his retreat.

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Jordan was Ryan's right-hand man, a handsome lad with the big hair and moody pout that girls swooned over. He had no ambition outside partying and having sexual encounters. His family and teachers were generally indulgent towards his laddish behaviour, won over by the twinkle in his eye and his undeniable charisma. Jordan attracted girls easily (and discarded them just as easily), scraped by in school and saved his energy for socialising.

‘Out the way, pizza face!’ he yelled jovially at Isaac, a quiet boy whose claim to fame was his severe acne. For once, Isaac paid little attention to him.

‘There’s a white hare on the playing field,’ he told Jordan, gesturing out of the music room window.

‘Shut up, Kruger,’ Jordan sneered. Isaac obeyed.

The first few spots appeared on Jordan’s forehead on Monday evening. By Wednesday, he had a full-blown case of acne, and by Friday, his whole face was like a red rash. His social worth deteriorated along with his complexion. Once Jordan’s spots were the first thing people noticed about him, they also began to realise he wasn’t all that clever or charming. Gemma Hamilton dumped him, a new experience for Jordan and one he didn’t enjoy at all. Carrie Hobbes, who had been pining after Jordan for months, suddenly found she was busy when he asked her to go to Duncan’s house party on Saturday.

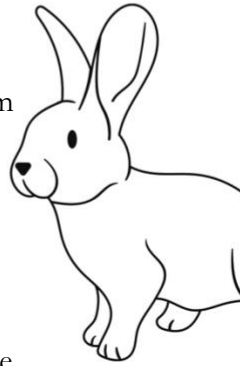
Even worse, nerdy Isaac’s acne had suddenly and miraculously cleared up. He smiled a lot more these days, a stunning smile.

Sloping back home with his hood up, Jordan saw the white hare, running along the verge before disappearing into the field. It was sweltering inside his hoodie, but Jordan found himself shivering, and he couldn’t stop for a long time.

For the first time in years, Jordan slept with the light on that night. It was a new moon, and it was dark as hell outside.

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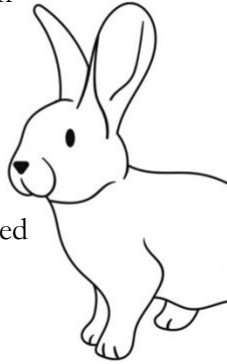
Ben was what his long-suffering Mum termed ‘a wild one.’ From his earliest days, his greatest joy was rule breaking. Tell him no more sweets before bedtime, and he’d steal from the



cupboard and gorge until he was sick. Tell him he was grounded, and he'd stay out all night. Tell him not to play with matches and he wouldn't rest until he had set something on fire.

He got away with it due to sheer force of personality. Eventually, people grew too exhausted to remonstrate with him or punish him and Ben sailed on, doing as he wished. He hung about with Ryan and the others because they never tried to thwart him. The fire up on the moor was just the latest, most spectacular manifestation of his self-assertion.

The white hare watched him from a safe distance in the park. Ben didn't notice, preoccupied as he was in filching some old dear's purse.



Ben was walking along a quiet street on Monday evening, casually smashing the odd car window with a metal pipe stolen from a builder's yard, when the hand of authority grabbed hold of his collar. Turned out one of the cars was an unmarked police car. His Mum had to leave her Zumba class early to fetch him from the station. Court date in eight weeks.

On Tuesday, he stopped by the supermarket and was stuffing his pockets with chocolate bars when the security guard pounced. Cue another visit from the police and another charge to face.

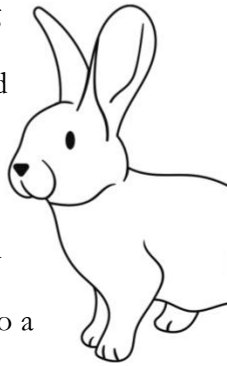
On Wednesday he was spraying some indecipherable scrawl on the side of the boules club hut when the park warden noticed and clouted him with a rake handle. The boules players heard his howls of outrage and promptly lobbed their warm beers at him. Ben slunk back home stinking of yeast and hops, thoroughly chastened.

On Thursday he twisted the tail of next-door's cat in a fit of spitefulness. The pain-maddened feline nearly clawed his face off in retaliation. Cue a trip to A and E, a tetanus injection and several stitches in his forehead.

On Friday Ben kept a low profile, until he grabbed Karen Marlow's ample right breast during break. Unbeknownst to Ben, Karen had been taking lessons in Judo. She threw him to the ground, knocking the wind from him, and left him there, gasping like a dying fish as their fellow students broke into applause.

On Saturday Ben ran wild, as if he knew he was doomed. Stones thrown at neighbours' windows, thieving from the corner shop, beating up anyone daft enough to get in his way, stealing money from the charity tins in a nearby church. He ended by nabbing his neighbour's car keys and speeding off, ignoring the man's furious yells.

His joyride lasted for precisely two minutes and thirty-seven seconds, until Ben swerved in terror upon spying a white hare sitting in the road, staring at him. He ploughed the car straight into a tree.



Ben hadn't been going very fast, and nothing was damaged except the car. Despite this, the police who arrived on the scene with unseemly speed took a very dim view of the situation. As they cuffed him and stuffed him in the back of their patrol car, Ben knew in the pit of his stomach that he wasn't going to get away with community service, not this time.

He gazed out of the police car window, at the half moon that counted down the nights, a lunar timepiece.

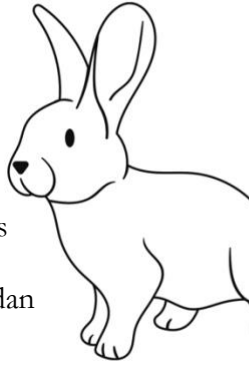
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Glen was an unremarkable teenager, neither stupid nor smart, neither handsome nor ugly. He did well enough at school, liked conventional things such as football, sneaking into pubs and hanging about on street corners. He went around with Ryan, Jordan and Ben largely because they'd

been friends since primary school. Whatever they wanted to do was fine by him. Life was easy when you took your cues from someone else.

It was rare that Glen had an original thought about anything, and so the white hare he saw watching him from a neighbour's garden didn't strike him as ominous, or even particularly unusual. The run of bad luck his mates were all experiencing might have worried another, slightly more imaginative or intelligent boy, but Glen blundered on, blind as a mole but lacking the mole's infallible sense of direction.

For most of the week, his placidity was justified. Nothing untoward happened, except his mates were all in rotten moods. Ryan was sulking over losing his place on the football team, Jordan was too preoccupied with his acne to think of doing anything fun and Ben was suspended. Expulsion pending.



He awoke on Saturday to find the air opaque with smoke and his parents squabbling over whether or not to evacuate. Another fire had started on the moor and was spreading fast. They could see it from their living room window. It would gobble up their little terraced house in moments. His Dad wanted to pack up and go. His Mum said don't be silly, turn the hose on it. His Dad said what the hell would a garden hose do against that? Besides, there was a hosepipe ban on.

Glen gazed at the fire and felt the merest hint of fear gnawing at his innards.

A dishevelled, smoke-smeared firefighter banged on the front door a few hours later to inform them that they were evacuating the entire street.

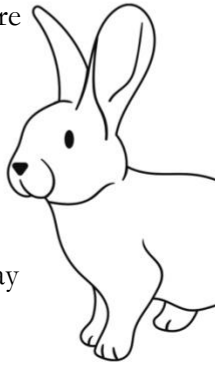
Twilight fell and found them huddled on a couple of cots in the local leisure centre. Dad was stoical about the whole thing, but Mum's earlier denial had broken down and she was fretful and

moody. Glen's sister Josie was doing her best to keep up the stropky and awkward act she'd perfected a while back, but her eyes were full of fear.

The talk among the other evacuees was gloomy. The fire service was doing its best and the army had been drafted in to help, but the fire was a ferocious one. It might be days, or weeks, before it was out. Glen's house was almost certain to be among the ones destroyed.

'It's weird, though,' said one woman. 'I'd swear the fire's moving against the wind.'

Glen, like everyone else sheltering in the leisure centre, was unable to sleep that night. He lay on a cot for a couple of hours, listening to the adults murmuring and restless children crying or moaning, until finally he got up and went outside, ignoring the pall of smoke that had descended. He wandered about the car park, kicking at a discarded beer can, until he spotted a white hare by the fence, watching him.



Glen unwisely kicked the beer can towards the hare.

Afterwards Glen was never able to explain adequately to himself or anyone else, what happened. One moment he was staring at a hare, the next he was confronted by a woman. A woman in black, defying the heat, a woman with silvery hair and burning eyes.

'I'm Rhiannon,' said the woman, before Glen had time to do more than blink in bewilderment. 'I'm a witch, and I live on the moors. The moors you and your little friends set fire to, four weeks ago.'

Glen blinked again. Then he did the only thing he could think of.

'I never. We never,' he protested. Brazen denial had always served Ben well.

Rhiannon's answering smirk held no humour.

‘Your pal Ben had the lighter. You found the twigs. It was Ryan who suggested the whole thing and Jordan who threw grass on the fire,’ she said coolly. Shaken by the woman’s knowledge of what had transpired, Glen’s audacity failed him.

‘We never,’ he protested feebly. Rhiannon rolled her eyes.

‘Yes, you did. Now listen well – you have until the moon sets. It’s a full moon tonight, the Buck moon. Either you tell the police and firefighters what you did, or I’ll make sure your house burns. Then Ryan and Jordan and Ben’s houses, and then I’ll make sure all four of you burn. You can take your chances with the law, or else with me. Up to you.’ Her blazing eyes bored into his, and he felt himself reeling. ‘Remember, I can do it. I’m a witch. Why do you think all your mates had such bad luck this month?’

Rhiannon nodded towards the leisure centre.

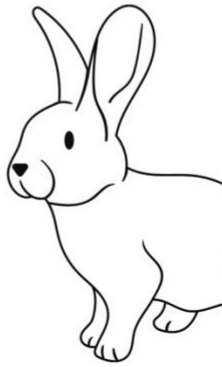
‘Hop to it, Firestarter.’

Then she was gone, and Glen saw a flash of white slip through the fence and across the road and away.

He glanced up at the full moon in the sky, reddened by the heat, and felt the shivers prickling his arms and back.

#

Glen didn’t crack right away. He was shaken by the encounter, but being a rational lad at heart, tried to explain it away. He was seeing things, was hallucinating, the woman was a crazy old cow who had guessed what happened. He sat in frenzied silence, until the firefighter came to speak to his parents.



He was sorry, the firefighter said. But the fire had sent out a tendril to touch the back fence of their house, and their garden was ablaze. They couldn't hold the fire back, and it was only a matter of time before their home was reduced to cinders. It was a freak accident – only their house was affected. The fire was hanging back from the other houses...

Glen didn't pause for thought. The memory of the witch's burning eyes stabbing into his brain, and opened his mouth, almost in reflex.

'It was me,' he shouted. 'Me and my mates. We set the first fire on the moor. We didn't mean to, but we did!'

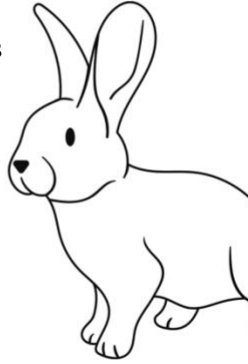
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Ryan and Jordan and Ben never forgave Glen for dobbling them in. And they didn't believe him about the witch, either. Or they said they didn't, but they all looked shell-shocked after Glen mentioned the white hare, and stopped shouting at him.

Ryan, Jordan, and Glen got off lightly for their arson. Community service, 200 hours of it. Six months in a young offenders' institute, suspended for two years, and fines they would be paying off until they were well into their twenties. As the judge reminded them, they were lucky they weren't staring at prison walls.

Ben got three years locked up. No one was surprised, except his Mum, a veteran in denial. However, there was no denying her subsequent existence was much more peaceful.

Glen's garden was reduced to ash, but his house survived. Abruptly, the firefighters had managed to drive the fire back, towards the moor, and it was extinguished by the time the sun rose, to everyone's relief. Jordan's acne began to clear up. Ryan's skill at football returned. The moors



recovered, the grasses growing back, the insects and birds and animals returning. The magpies chattered and spied. All was as it should be.

The full moon waxed and waned in the sky. August brought the Sturgeon Moon, September the Harvest Moon. The fires began to fade into memory, other than the traces they had wrought upon the lives of four foolish boys.

As for Rhiannon, she returned to her moors. She spoke with Skadi, prayed to Hecate, and ran beneath the full moon.

And if she never moved on, she'll be living there still.

