



WYRDWOOD
Historical Society Presents

Nurse Magdaleine

Angel Leigh McCoy

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The Wyrddwood Historical Society Presents

Nurse Magdaleine

by Angel Leigh McCoy



*“Hail Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, our Life, our Sweetness, and our Hope.
To thee, we cry, poor banished children of Eve. To thee we send up our sighs,
mourning, and weeping in this vale of tears.”*

— Catholic Rosary Prayer —

THE BARRIER BETWEEN EARTH AND GEHENNA IS LIFTING. I feel it grow thinner with each passing moment. The sun is disappearing beyond the Atlantic; darkness descends, and spirits walk among the living. I see them. They look much as they did when they died, shriveled with illness or bloodied, skin the gray of death, jaundiced eyes hollowed by misery.

In the convent, I had time for reflection, and this I know: life is the process of dying. From the moment we're born, Death walks beside us. It haunts us with loving dedication, unwilling to let us forget—for long—that we belong to it. If this Great War has taught me anything, it's that no one escapes Death or the Judgment that follows—not Evil and not the sainted.

Yesterday, on *La Toussaint*, we venerated the saints, the martyred hallows, and all who have achieved the sanctity of *le Paradis*. My prayers to them echo in my heart, and I am replete with hope that, when it is my time, I will join them. I have lived a good life, one of which I am proud. I do not pretend to be worthy of sainthood, however, for I certainly am not.

Besides, today is not for the sainted. It is for the dead, *les morts*. Today is *le Jour des Morts—02 Novembre*. Souls held in Gehenna return to look upon the world they

lost. No punishment was ever so painful as seeing how life continues after you're gone. The truth of one's own insignificance is humbling to those souls ready for absolution, and it is torture to those who are not.

From sunset to sunrise, the visiting spirits crowd around the living. They push and shove, jostling for position so they can whisper questions, curses, or endearments to the people they knew in life, as if they could still touch or even influence them somehow.

I've dreaded this return to Brest, but I came to see my friend and mentor, Doctor Benoît Beaulieu. My destination is the military camp where I used to work. I was a nurse, tending soldiers' bodies and minds, and thus, it is here that Doctor Benoît will look for me. I know this because I've seen him twice—always on 02 *Novembre, le Jour des Morts*—since we were separated by Death.

I enter through the gates, unchallenged; all are welcome on the Night of All Souls.

Some call this military installation "Pontanezen Camp," some "Camp Napoleon," and others "the rest camp." It's anything but restful. Everyone leaves here in only one of two ways: either with rifle to shoulder, headed toward the front, or with rifle emptied, headed toward the grave.

The camp has not changed, except that the smells of latrine, wood smoke, and truck exhaust hover thicker than I remember. There are no vibrant colors in the places of war, perhaps the rains—or the tears—wash them away.

The stone buildings resemble long coffins, set out in well-dressed rows, uniform. A haze obscures the farthest ones, fog rolling in from the harbor, the *Rade de Brest*. I'm used to this. This close to the cold ocean, the clouds are iron gray and heavy. A constant drizzle keeps the ground muddy and wool uniforms moist. The whole time I worked here, I never felt dry. I could never get warm. It's a sensation that has stayed with me, as if the cold took up residence in my bones.

Here is a drab American, half-obsured by the waning light, forcing his shovel into the dirt with a stomp. His boot slips in the mud, and he nearly falls. He takes the Lord's name in vain. As soon as I look at him, I see how and when his life ends, as that is my gift and my curse.

Balle, 5 Novembre, 1918.

A bullet, three days hence. I make the sign of the cross and say a prayer that his passing happens quickly. I wish I could go back to the days when I didn't understand what I was seeing, when I didn't know so intimately the fragility of life. Ah, to be innocent again. I think back to my childhood in Landrévarzec, gathering eggs from the hens and milking the cow, my dog Pierrot at my heels. But then, my father was struck by

a runaway carriage. I was sixteen.

Immediately after his death, I held a vigil for three days and three nights. I prayed, neither sleeping nor eating. I could not comprehend his loss. In my sorrow, I begged the saints to give me a reason, to explain why my father had been taken from me without warning. It was then that Saint Michel appeared to me. I could not look upon his saintly face for it was too beautiful, but I heard his words.

He said, "From this day forward, you will know the fates of men. You will renounce all that you hold dear, and you will be an instrument of peace among the dying. If you do this, you will one day take a seat beside our Father's throne."

It was as he said. From that day forward, I knew the timing and instrument of people's deaths, and when I looked in the mirror, I saw my own: *La Grippe, 02 Novembre, 1918*. Today.

I foresaw when my mother would die, my friends, and everyone who attended church. I had much to learn about how to use my gift. If only I'd kept it to myself and never told anyone...

In that first week, I saw a man I'd known my whole life, Chrétien Dubolan.

Couteau, 25 Fevrier, 1912. That very evening, he was slated to die with a knife wound. I went to him and I warned him. The look on his face, at first amused, then annoyed, should have discouraged me, but I didn't give up. I followed him and begged him to be careful. Eventually, he shoved me away.

He was the first, the first to come true. He died on the road, stabbed by a highwayman, and I learned that his death was God's business, not mine. I could not interfere, should not interfere.

The next day, word had spread throughout the village of his death and of my warning to him.

Everything changed then.

"Witch!" the citizens of Landrévarzec cried, throwing rocks and spitting on me. They refused me entrance to their shops, dragged their children inside, and closed their doors as I passed their homes.

"Demon child," the priest announced, crossing himself as if to ward me off.

My mother would not stop crying.

I had no other choice: I ran from my home in the night and traveled south along the main road, begging rides until I came to *la Ville de Quimper*. The *Cathedral de Saint-Corentin* reached into the heavens as if it bridged the gap between sinners and God, and I threw myself upon the mercy of the monks there.

That's when I first met Doctor Benoît and saw his death.

Balle, 02 Avril, 1916.

I was dirty and hungry, my feet bloodied, and I had run like a coward from my calling to avoid persecution. I deserved no succor, but Doctor Benoît did not judge me. He cared not that I revealed neither my full name nor my full story, but took me to my new home with the Augustinian sisters of the *Miséricord de Jesus* and helped me to choose a new name, Magdaleine-Éloïse. He convinced me I had suffered enough. To this day, I remember the kindness in his eyes and the feel of his hand. Weighty upon my shoulder, his touch anchored me in safety.

On the eve of taking my vows, I confessed my gift to Doctor Benoît. He did not treat me as if I were a liar, a madwoman, nor a cursed demon.

“Sister. I don't know what happened to you before you came here, however I do know that you have a kind heart. I agree with Saint Michel that you can be a great comfort to the dying.”

“But how?”

He considered my question, then a wave of relaxation washed over him. He smiled. “As a nurse. Can you see it? I can.”

I could, and I acted upon it immediately. During my training at the *Hôpital-Général de Saint Antoine* in Quimper, I worked closely with Doctor Benoît, and I learned to use my gift, my knowledge of Death's calendar, to ease the suffering of the dying. I became a nurse so I would be close to them—and to him.

Doctor Benoît and I arrived the first time at Pontanezen Camp in 1915 to work at the military hospital. Truck after truck was delivering soldiers from the front lines in pieces. We did our best to keep them alive and make them whole again. In a place rampant with death and fear, Doctor Benoît was my sanctuary.

During the day, we were a whirlwind in the camp hospital: triaging, treating, bandaging, and performing surgery. In the evenings, we went round to all our patients, together, and we prayed with them, laughed with them, cried with them, and encouraged them.

“Our suffering is finite,” Doctor Benoît liked to say. “One day, it will end.”

There's a French officer here. *Baïonnette, 29 Janvier, 1918.* He is herding soldiers toward the dining hall. “Fall in line!” he shouts, and they do as commanded.

On the interior, the stone barracks are divided into large rooms, some holding as many as a hundred beds, spaced with precision from wall to wall. This first one houses new soldiers, British and American, who have just disembarked from the enormous

ships docked in Brest harbor.

As it's *le Jour des Morts*, there are spirits roaming between the cots, searching for familiar faces. Doctor Benoît will not be here. He'll be at the cemetery, beyond the hospital buildings. He knows to look for me there. But, I'm in no hurry. Tonight, I want to savor my memories. If all goes as I expect, this will be my last opportunity.

The façade looms over me as I move on. Soldiers stand in the shelter of the overhanging roof, in small groups, enduring the cold rain to smoke cigarettes and talk. I look at their faces, learn their deaths.

A gaunt American with two large front teeth says, "I heard the Fritzie's got a big gun...can shoot a hundred kilometers, all the way to Paris from the front."

Bombe, 6 Novembre, 1918.

Further along, a British soldier with deep-set eyes the color of periwinkle says, "Bloody Hell. They're dug in at Reims. Only way Alleyman's going to win this war is if they roust those Frenchies. I'm rooting for Jacques, but I wouldn't bet a shilling on it."

Baïonnette, 4 Novembre, 1918.

I watch a rugged young man drive his hand back through his curly brown hair. "I hail from the great state of Illinois. Name's Martin. Dang if I ain't happy to be off that boat."

Balle, 5 Novembre, 1918.

A Scotsman with a wide face and worry lines in his forehead, cigarette bobbing on his lip as he talks, says, "Aye. See this picture? Alice be the one on the right, and that other one's Moira. Pretty, don't you think? Alice is mine, but I'll introduce you to Moira when we get back."

Balle, 6 Novembre, 1918.

Death doesn't like to travel alone. *Pauvre jeune-hommes*. They are already like ghosts to me.

I pray, "Saint Michel, blessed is your name. By the power of God, defend these innocent souls in battle. Stand between them and the grip of the Devil. This I humbly beseech. Amen."

I don't want to know when and how they will die. I never have. It's God's business. But it was also His will that I be given this gift, so I do what good I can with it.

Unlike the living, the spirits of the dead do not trouble me. Once they've died, I no longer know how they met their ends, so I carry no burden for them. And yet, there are so many here, all in uniform of one kind or other: soldiers, nurses, doctors, Red Cross, all dead in this war, in the hospital beds in this camp, and buried beyond the wall in the

cemetery.

One of the spirits stands taller than the rest. Ancient, his skin is fish-belly white, his auburn hair stringy, face hawkish, clothes ragged like kelp. Reddened eyes stare back at me as if he can hold me in place with them. He's one of the guards from Gehenna. A *Fomorien*. One of a demon-like race risen from the ocean to work at Death's door. Where there is one, there will be others.

The *Fomorien* takes a step toward me, and the sea of spirits parts like water before the bow of a ship as he continues forward, coming this way. The *Fomoriens* don't like me. They sense that I'm not normal and never was, that I walk the edge between life and death. I don't what they would do to me or how they would use me if they got their hands on me.

Run! I slip between the buildings, into the swarming crowd of dead—so many restless souls—toward the living. I'll be safe there, if I hurry.

I round a corner, stop, and look back to see if the *Fomorien* is still following. My nerves...

But, he's gone. Nowhere to be seen.

Then a voice—a woman's whisper nearby—draws my attention. "We lost another dozen overnight. I'm at a loss. That's over three hundred dead and another two-fifty sick. It's hopeless." Nurse Marcelle Roux has changed since the last time I visited. Her eyes have sunken deeper, as have her cheeks.

Coeur, 12 Juillet, 1926. I've always known that she would survive the war only to be done in by her heart.

"It's not hopeless," says the nurse with Marcelle. *La Grippe, 24 Decembre, 1918*. "Don't say that. They're looking for a cure. At least we haven't fallen ill yet." Yet. The influenza will take her by Christmas.

Marcelle and the other nurse walk toward the far end of the complex, keeping to the wooden planks placed down to form a path over the mud. The hospital buildings are that way. I follow.

Beyond where I can see, lies the cemetery, and more spirits emerge from the mists that shield it from view. More *Fomoriens* too. Unlike the timid or eager dead, the *Fomoriens* move with measured authority and strength. *Le Jours des Morts* is the one day a year when spirits are allowed leave from Gehenna, but their guards do not let them stray far. Nor are they allowed to interfere with the living.

Head down, walking with the two nurses, I go into the first hospital building, to stay out of sight before I continue on to the cemetery where Doctor Benoît will be

waiting for me.

Darkness and the chill of late Autumn permeate the camp hospital. The beds are all occupied. So many injured...and even more sick. They're congested and feverish. Blood collects at the corners of their mouths and in their nostrils. Vomit buckets sit between beds. The smell of sick hangs in the air, thick with the promise of infection.

La Grippe, 2 Novembre, 1918

La Grippe, 2 Novembre, 1918

La Grippe, 3 Novembre, 1918

La Grippe, 3 Novembre, 1918

La Grippe, 4 Novembre, 1918

La Grippe, 3 Novembre, 1918

La Grippe, 5 Novembre, 1918

I close my eyes.

"Purulent Bronchitis." Two doctors wearing surgical masks are discussing the disease in hushed tones. One is British, the other French. I move closer to better hear them.

"I've lost half my staff," says the French one, his face twisted with sorrow.

"I know. I'm not supposed to talk about it, but a colleague of mine working at Fillievres wrote to tell me that they're putting the infected in quarantine and leaving them to fend for themselves. They're evacuating the uninfected. I fear we must do the same. Sending these men out into the battlefield while they're contagious is unconscionable."

"*Oui*. It's spreading. The numbers I'm hearing add up to tens of thousands of dead already, here and in America."

"Bloody Hell. It's a pandemic. If this influenza continues to spread..."

I cross myself. Influenza. *La Grippe*. I know from experience how deadly it can be, and how quickly it spreads, especially between soldiers living in cramped quarters, sharing primitive latrines, and eating all together. I wish I could help them, but I gave up being a nurse on that fateful day in April, 1916.

I'll just go straight to the cemetery and wait there for Doctor Benoît, away from the sick and dying. The building's back door opens onto a road that will take me to the field where they bury the dead.

A dozen bodies on stretchers, covered with sheets, await burial. Their spirits linger nearby. One, a Frenchman who can be no older than eighteen, sobs. He understands what has happened. The others wander, confused, unwilling to stray too far from their

bodies.

There's nothing I can do for them now. In many ways, I am just like them, lost and alone, overcast by my sorrow, and desperate to see my dear friend again.

The old traditions still hold sway here. An older nurse is setting candles in jars along the road to guide the dead. Others are heading toward the cemetery with flowers and food, offerings for the departed.

I follow them to a large mound of dirt. There's a priest there, praying and waving a smoking censer. "*Dieu bénit Noé et ses fils, et leur dit: Soyez féconds, multipliez, et remplissez la terre. Vous serez un sujet de crainte et d'effroi pour tout animal de la terre...*"

Go forth and multiply. The covenant with Noah. It continues, "And for your lifeblood, I will surely demand an accounting... I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being."

A nurse has fallen to her knees in the mud, her face twisted with sorrow, a crucifix held to her lips. Her white apron is splattered and stained. "Forgive us," she prays.

Another kneels beside her, comforting her. "Shhh," she says. "We had no choice. There were too many. We had to."

Had to what?

Tokens lie upon the mound, mementos of lives that have ended. Cigarettes and liquor bottles left as gifts for the departed. Flowers and food. I comprehend. It's a mass grave. By the looks of the spirits, I conclude that they all died of influenza, their bodies buried quickly to keep the disease from spreading.

The spirits of those buried in the mound are unsteady. Moving like sheep, all as one, but undirected, with no destination in mind, they pull at their hair and clothes, eyes bulging with fear. One bleats, and they all take up the call, awakened from their stupor, roused by the noise. Like wolves howling at the moon, they cry out. So many. Too loud. Too pained!

The stoic *Fomoriens* walk among them as if taking an accounting of their number or state. Occasionally, one touches a spirit and says something I cannot hear. The spirit calms abruptly and replies as if asked a question. They then fall in line behind the *Fomorien*, no longer undirected.

Doctor Benoît is a good *Breton*, but his ancestors came from the isles. He heard the old tales, passed down from father to son for millennia. The *Fomoriens*, he once told me, are an ancient ruling people who come from Noah, *beni de Dieu*. Their magic made them the enemies of the fae, who were jealous of their God-given abilities—like mine.

Doctor Benoît told me these things to reassure me that I was special, not strange, not cursed.

I angle away from the *Fomoriens*. The grave I seek is at the back of the cemetery.

A sober-faced soldier pulls a box of cookies from his pocket and places them on a flat stone. *Foie, 10 Février, 1931*. This one at least will die neither in a trench nor in the hospital here. Liver disease will eventually drag him down.

With reverence, a man in a doctor's coat props an old photo against a flower vase. His sorrow shows on his face, and then he coughs violently. *La Grippe, 16 Novembre, 1918*.

I weave between graves, each step careful, making my way to where an ancient fig tree stands. The grave I seek lies beneath the shelter of its heavy branches, and Nurse Marcelle is already here bearing a bouquet of chrysanthemums that she sets at the foot of the rough-hewn wooden cross.

She says, "Rest in peace."

But, my Benoît is not here. I don't understand. He's always here, every year without fail, waiting for me. Anxiety closes my throat, and I turn to search for him.

Behind me, a *Fomorien* towers over me, and his bloodshot eyes lock with mine. At his back, an army of the dead await the orders of their jailors. Shoulder to shoulder, the dead watch me with clarity, as if they have nothing left to fear.

I tell myself I should run, but I can't move.

The *Fomorien* leans down to me, his voice an ancient echo, and I hear a language as old and magical as he: *Tá an ghrian ag cuairt á tabhairt dúinn...*

And somehow I understand. Dawn is coming, and *le Jour des Morts* is at an end. It is time for all spirits to return to Purgatory, to Gehenna, where we must await judgment. I have dawdled too long!

In the East, a glow is brightening the horizon. I see that now, and I face the *Fomorien* and insist, "It's not my time yet."

The *Fomorien* doesn't flinch. He reaches to touch me, a clawed hand with bony knuckles.

I duck and run away.

My rebellion sends a wave of discontent and confusion through the sea of spirits, as if they can sense my urgency. They close in on me, blocking my way.

"Run!" I cry. "You do not have to go back." I push and shove them, squeeze between their bony bodies. "Go! Run!"

Spirits crash around, roused by my words. They grab at me with filthy hands,

latching onto my hair and pulling it loose from its bun, tearing strands from my scalp. They can't abide anyone who isn't suffering as they do. A hand grips my face and slips a finger into my mouth. It tastes like blood and dirt, and I gag. All I need is more time. Just a little more time. I have to get to the hospital to see Benoît! I shove them away.

I spot a *Fomorien*, growing more fierce by the moment, attempting to reign in the rioting spirits. He backhands one and sends the spirit sprawling.

“God forgive me,” I pray. But it’s too soon. The sunrise must wait. It must!

Nurse Marcelle, oblivious to the souls that surround her, has made it back to the second hospital building. I see her enter it through the double doors. I go after her. Wiping the tears from my eyes, I shove my way into the building and stop dead in my tracks.

The room has an unnatural quiet punctuated only by the sound of coughing. So many sick. So many dying. I’m shocked by the numbers. Hundreds. *La Grippe*. These *pauvres* are defeated before they even see the enemy.

Nurse Marcelle is here, now wearing a surgical mask on her face. She is walking down the main aisle between beds, and I hurry to catch up with her. She stops beside him.

Benoît. Smaller than I remember, shriveled, shrunken with sickness, hands folded over his rosary.

La Grippe, 02 Novembre, 1918. Today.

Nurse Marcelle bends over his bed. “Rest now, Doctor. I put the flowers on her grave, as you requested. Sister Magdaleine-Éloïse knows you’re thinking of her.” She pats him, then walks away.

Without a word, Benoît closes his eyes and begins to pray.

I move closer, close enough to touch, though he cannot feel it. A wet sob explodes from inside me as I look down into his beloved, hallowed face. Such a man, such a holy man. If anyone deserves a seat at God’s side, it is my Benoît.

That is why I interfered in God’s business a second time.

Balle, 02 Avril, 1916.

My Benoît's death was to come by bullet in the Spring of 1916. On that day, the second of April, a soldier awoke in his hospital bed, traumatized and disoriented. He managed to take a gun from a visiting officer.

“Where am I? Where’s my men?” the soldier shouted. “Tell me, or I kill you all!” His face was as pale as chicken meat, his eyes like those of a terrified horse.

The room was filled with patients, nurses, and visitors. Someone screamed, and a

general hue and cry went up. Before long, all eyes were on the agitated young man. Those who could move had taken cover. Others just stared in disbelief.

Benoît put up his hands and approached the soldier.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said. “You’re in France. You’re safe. Put the gun down. We want to help you.”

I knew what was about to happen. I’d dreaded that day with all my heart and had prayed many times for guidance on what to do when it finally came.

The soldier wasn’t listening. His mind was broken, and he pointed the gun around at us as if we were his enemies, his captors, and soon-to-be murderers.

Benoît drew his attention with a shout, “Hey!”

The gunman aimed at him with a jerk, and forgetting all my deliberations, I acted on instinct. I stepped between them.

In the second before he fired, I met the soldier’s eyes for a timeless moment. He looked as shocked as anyone. *Pauvre jeune homme*.

I heard the crack of the gunshot as the bullet crashed into my chest, the bullet that God had intended for Benoît. I felt the horror of pressure inside my body before I felt the pain, and then all I knew were Benoît’s arms around me, his tears on my forehead, and his prayer for me near my ear.

His beloved face was the last thing I saw as a living woman.

La Grippe, 02 Novembre, 1918. I’d taken his death date and given him mine. A fair exchange, I felt, for he had so much more to offer than I, so many more to save.

A *Fomorien* wearing a primitive eagle-beaked helm enters the hospital building and begins tethering spirits. She’s leading a great parade of the dead with their white-washed eyes and clammy skin. Each one she touches falls in behind her. The slow procession marches down the center aisle, methodical and brooking no argument.

But I won’t go without Benoît. I won’t! It’s my fault that he missed his time—my fault! I don’t know what the repercussions for that might be. Will his spirit wander lost forever? I can’t let that happen. To be his guide into death, that is why I waited for him and even hid from my own Day of Judgment. I could not leave him behind. All these years... What a burden I have borne. To miss his passing now...

But, dawn is casting golden light across the sky, and the *Formorien* is approaching!

“It’s time, Benoît,” I whisper to him. “Let go. Come with me. You needn’t be afraid. God is waiting for us.”

A cold shadow falls upon us as the *Fomorien* leans down.

Benoît's prayer dies with his last breath. His spirit hand lifts, and I enfold it in both of mine. Benoît sits up from his dead body, as Jesus did, as we all do in time, and he looks at me, first with surprise, then understanding.

He smiles that beatific smile I've missed so much, and I am transported with joy.

So it is that I do not evade the *Fomorien's* touch. It burns like ice upon my shoulder, and I am leashed once again. I watch as she touches Benoît too. We join the procession with all the other pitiful dead. *Le Jour des Morts* is over for another year. It is time for all souls to return to Gehenna, to endure our purification.

Perhaps now I can be hallowed, accepted into *le Paradis*, with Benoît at my side.



The influenza pandemic of 1918-1919 killed more people than the Great War, known today as World War I (WWI), at somewhere between 20 and 40 million people. It has been cited as the most devastating epidemic in recorded world history... Known as "Spanish Flu" or "La Grippe," the influenza of 1918-1919 was a global disaster. — Molly Billings, June 1997, <https://virus.stanford.edu/uda/>



Thanks for Reading

WW951520

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Read more. A peripheral novella to this book, titled "Charlie Darwin Or, The Trine Of 1809," is available as a free download at WyrldwoodAngel.com/charlie.



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Know anyone you think would like this story?

Please let them know about it! They'll appreciate that you did and so will I.

And, in appreciation, here's a sneak preview of the next book in the *Wyrldwood Welcome* series.



STALKING THE MOON

Wyrldwood Welcome Book #1

Sample

CHAPTER 1

*“Surrealism had a great effect on me because then I realized
that the imagery in my mind wasn't insanity.
Surrealism to me is reality.”*

—John Lennon—

DRIVING MY YELLOW FIESTA, singing at the top of my lungs with Pink, I cut through the city then turned off the highway onto the rural roads that would take me back to my workplace—the Vince Malum Residential Living Center, home of Peoria’s non-violent socio- and psychopaths.

Once a week, I had an appointment with my psychiatrist—Dr. Richard Reuter. Richard was my head shrinker. I’d been seeing him regularly for twenty years. At times, it felt like we’d grown up together, although the age difference (more than fifteen years) made that a silly fantasy.

Richard kept an office in the Center’s main building, where my mom, Gisèle Rose, had been a resident for more than twenty-five years. Mental illness was the Rose legacy. Being her daughter, I hadn't fallen far from the tree. In Mom's absence, I'd been raised by my grandfather, Abraham "Abram" Rose.

Along the field-lined road, the Center appeared in the distance. The roof on the original Victorian stone house and the top two floors of the twin residential wings peeked over the treetops. A German immigrant named Vince Malum had built it for his schizophrenic wife in 1927 and named it the Morning Glory Institution, "a home for people in discord with the world."

Before long, there were more patients than rooms, so Malum built an addition at the back of the main house. Everyone called it the Tower. The patients lived in the Tower—men in the west wing, women in the east—and the doctors, such as Richard, had their offices in the main house. When Malum died, his grandchildren renamed the place

in his honor.

I guided the car down the paved drive between the apple, cherry, and pear trees in Malum's Orchard. At harvest-time each year, when the trees were heavy with fruit, people came from all over and were free to pick as much as they wanted, so long as they gave ten percent of their harvest to the Center. The people got free fruit, and the Center got free pickers. Sometimes, whole families descended upon the orchard. They looked happy and normal with their ladders and baskets.

Abram and I had climbed up into those trees every summer, back when we were still trying to look happy and normal, back before I learned that my mother was locked away inside an institution. I remembered looking over at the Center's dark windows, glimpsing movement, and wondering who was inside. Sometimes a pane of glass would catch a ray of sunlight and reflect it with a wink. It chilled me even on the warmest summer days.

The main gate was an enormous iron monstrosity. People said Malum shipped it over from Germany and that it had once been the gate on a concentration camp, although no one had ever proved that.

The fence around the Center's land was not designed to keep anyone out—or even in. It was a mental blockade, intended primarily to discourage restless patients from wandering. An able-bodied patient determined to run away could scale the fence with relative ease. The Center relied instead on the vast acres of farmland surrounding it to keep escapees from succeeding, and it was rare that they had to send out search parties. Out there in the middle of nowhere, there wasn't much traffic and nowhere to go but into the corn fields.

I pulled up to the security box and swiped my employee badge across it. The gate opened, and I drove through the moment it was wide enough.

The main house had climbing ivy, gables, manicured shrubs, and a circular drive. It was a wannabe English manor. Some days, I appreciated the sight of it. Others, it repulsed me. As I approached, I found my feeling sentimental about the old place. It was, after all, my second home.

The staff entrance was on the women's wing, near the employee parking lot. Out of habit, I entered there. Nurses, orderlies, and doctors all greeted me as I made my way to Richard's office.

Richard was seated at his desk. "Hey, Vivi. Come on in." He rebuttoned the collar of his white, custom-fitted dress shirt.

"Howdy." I shut the door behind me and went to the leather couch. It was

overstuffed with a high back and deep seat. I felt small on it, but that was part of Richard's evil plot. Plus, it would have been impossible to fall off it while under hypnosis. It cradled me.

"What part of my psyche are we going to poke today?"

Richard folded his arms on the desk, a pen flapping in one hand as he looked me over. "I want to revisit your early days," he said. "I've been going through the transcripts of our sessions, compiling them, and there are a couple things I'd like to revisit."

"Let's get to it then."

The first time I met Richard, back in *the early days*, he was finishing his last year as a graduate student in the Psychology Department at the University of Illinois. He was in Peoria doing an internship at the counseling center, and Abram had dragged me there to get my head fixed—at the junior high principal's request.

Back then, Richard had a long ponytail and was every teenage girl's dream of the older college boy. I was only thirteen, and he was taller than me, though that changed when I had my growth spurt a few years later.

Thirteen-year-old Me had gone into his office with a chip on my shoulder, hating Abram, hating my illness, and hating Dr. Richard Reuter before I'd even met him.

He'd appeared in the waiting room and asked, "Viviane? Right? Would you come with me?"

"I don't got a choice."

Abram hissed, "Hey," at me, and said "Be nice."

"Yeah, sure."

I walked into the office and went straight to a chair, flopped there, and crossed my arms on my chest. The first thing I noticed that interested me was the plate of cookies on the coffee table. They were chocolate chip and appeared homemade. I pretended not to see them. I didn't want him to think I was going to stay all that long, and besides, my stomach didn't feel too good.

Richard sat in the chair opposite me and watched me for a full minute. Finally, he asked, "How old are you?"

"Fifteen." It was a bold-faced lie.

"I know you're lying."

I asked, "How old are you?"

"Twenty-nine."

"Are you a fag?" I said with vehemence, calculating his possible reactions.

He didn't even flinch. "Viviane, do you know why your grandfather brought you

here?"

"Because he's a sociopath afraid of being noticed. I draw attention to him, and he wants me to stop."

He smiled at that, and for the first time, but not the last, I thought how handsome he was.

In that first session, he didn't hypnotize me, though later, it became a regular part of our therapy sessions. Richard felt it was the best way to track down the source of my hallucinations. He would take me back to the time before my first hallucination, and we'd go over the events of a day or two in each session, gradually working forward through my memories. It was my own personal reality-TV show.

One time, I had what can only be described as a past-life memory, or maybe a dream. Both Richard and I waved it off as an aberration, though I never forgot it. The dream had been wonderful, about a place with emerald hills, crystal streams, and a palace that felt like home. Whenever I thought about it, I could still imagine the smell of honeysuckle on the breeze.

Twenty years later, I was thirty-three, and our regressions were catching up to the conscious flow of time. In the hypnosis sessions, he recorded my soul in bits and pieces, saved forever as audio recordings, transcribed to digital documents, and printed out on paper. He kept the files in his cabinets.

I'd often wondered what would happen when we finally caught up to the present moment. Maybe I'd die. Maybe he'd die. Maybe the entire world would end as the Ouroboros swallowed its own tail.

"All right." Richard got up from his desk. "I'm ready, if you are." He sat in the chair opposite me and leaned forward to turn on the metronome.

I said, "Take me to a happy day."

"You know the drill. Close your eyes, relax, and remember."

Not every tick and tock of the metronome sounded the same. The differences were subtle, but they were there if I listened for them. It was a song without rhyme or reason.

It started small and distant: *tick*.

The cuckoo clock on the wall at Abram's house had to be wound. I loved pulling the chains that raised the heavy, metal pine cones. *Tock*. It had been my job, every morning, when I was a kid. My body rocked to the beat: *tick tock*. Time ebbed, and space flowed. My spine relaxed. *Tick*. Gravity released me. *Tock*. The metronome sang its song in my belly. *Tick tock*. I was energy, and I radiated.

"We're going to continue our journey back in time," Richard said. The waves of his

voice rippled through me, and the present faded into the background.

I followed the metronome down into a trance. We had a signal. I raised a finger to indicate that I was ready to begin.

"Go back," Richard suggested, "to the moment when you first met Simon, when you were thirteen."

The scene formed around me, inside me, throughout me.

"Describe it to me."

I'm home, and I'm taking a shower. There's blood running down my leg. It's swirling in the water and spinning down the drain. I know what it is. Lettie's had hers since last year, and she took me to buy the stuff I'd need. I'm really glad I didn't have to do that with my grandpa.

Lettie and me, we read the little instruction book that came in the box and made fun of the pictures. She warned me how it would be, the cramps and mess, but it's worse when it's actually happening. It's scary and weird. I keep thinking that my blood is supposed to stay in my body.

So, I'm standing there in the shower, watching my blood drain away, and I'm trying not to cry, wondering if I'm going to die, and that's when I hear a man. He sounds like James Bond. "You're probably not going to die."

I scream and cover my private parts with my hands, but no one's there.

The voice says, "What I mean is, you are going to be just fine." But nobody's there. I'm freaking out. I jump out of the shower and run through the house. I'm screaming.

The voice is following me. "Oh, lass, it's okay."

I streak into the kitchen, and my grandpa is there, trying to calm me down.

I'm crying, naked and wet, shaking all over, blood staining my leg, and Grandpa thinks I'm upset because of my period, but that isn't it. It's the man talking to me right next to my ear, when there's nobody there.

He says his name is Simon.

The metronome sang. *Tick. Tock.*

"When you return to your waking state," Richard said, "you'll remember all the events you described to me, clearly and in detail."

Tick.

"Feel the couch supporting you. It's solid and real. Feel the air as it passes through your nostrils. You're here with me, now, in the present." *Tock.*

I opened my eyes and looked across at Richard's familiar face.

He turned off the metronome. "How do you feel?"

I answered with a nod. When I wake up and remember everything even more clearly than before, I'm reminded of my own life again, as if I've been looking through an album of old pictures.

"Are you hungry? Want to grab dinner?"

"Not tonight. I want to spend some time with Colin before I go see Mom. Rain check?"

"Yeah, some other time." Richard got up and went to his desk. "How's Colin doing?"

"Best fiancé ever."

"Great. See you next week."

I'd been dismissed.

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About the Author

Angel Leigh McCoy has worn many faces, told many stories, loved many people, and lived many lives. Through it all, writing has been her one constant.

Angel is a spark of creative force behind the epic [Dire Multiverse](#) and the darkly fanciful [Wyrdwood](#) project.

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