

A Story for Nerina

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In the late afternoon, a young woman drives along the west coast of her family's ancestral country. On this trip she is taking time alone to think about recent events in her life. The solitude calms her, and she allows thoughts to float in her mind, like the patchy mist that rises from the rugged land on either side of the road. She rounds a curve and inhales sharply, as she spots an imposing mound in the middle of a broad grey-green field, and beyond it, a golden swath of sea that washes toward the land, disappearing behind craggy rocks braced atop cliffs.

No traffic has passed her for a half hour or more. She thinks it unlikely that anyone will round the curve and plow into her car, but, just in case, parks carefully, as far off the narrow road as possible, and then sets out across the field. She smiles broadly as she gets closer to the mound. It is tall, wide, covered with a tangle of thorns and brambles, and crowned by large rectangular stones, a couple of which still stand, though most have fallen on their sides. She recalls history that says these are burial mounds from the very early days of these islands, but she prefers the local legends claiming them as 'fairy mounds.' Most especially, she likes the part that says if a human digs down quietly and quickly enough, she will break through into a fairy's palace, in the Otherworld. Her smile turns into delighted laughter as she considers the idea.

She spots a large, bright red butterfly perched on the top edge of the tallest stone, waving its wings gently back and forth. Suddenly, it dives downward, circles her twice, and then zooms toward the path leading downward from the cliff's edge. The young woman follows hurriedly, to keep it in sight. So far as she knows, brilliant red butterflies like this one live exclusively in

warm climates – Africa or the Amazon. She wonders how it got here and wants to see where it leads her. It hovers at the path, as if pausing to allow her to catch up.

The path is faint and narrow and winds downward to many tidal pools. The sea washes into the pools, turning them an iridescent golden hue. Impulsively, she picks up a large stone and drops it into the biggest pool. The stone sends mini-waves outward to the edges of the pool, and, for a few moments, the golden water becomes colorful, shimmering with deep shades of red, blue, green, and yellow. She sighs with pleasure at the beauty of this coastline and the sea.

The butterfly is suddenly on the move again, flitting down the path, and the young woman follows. They skirt the tidal pools and wind up beneath a rock overhang, where the path expands into a shallow, semicircular cavern. She stands facing out to sea, enjoying the magical feeling of being in this cavern, on the edge of the land, and in the company of her friend, the red butterfly, who continues to hover nearby.

The sea flows toward the cavern, its golden surface stopping only a few feet in front of and below where she stands. She studies its brilliant reflection for a few moments, and then notices something odd: the golden light has begun to expand and is growing ever brighter. It now appears not only on the surface of the water, but also on the rocky cavern floor on which she stands, and it is coming not just from the sun's reflection on the water, but from behind her, as well.

She turns quickly, to find that the back wall of the cavern has opened. Golden light pours through the large opening and frames a tall, elegant figure clothed in a long, white robe. The figure smiles and extends her hand, saying, "I am so happy you chose to visit us."

The young woman's eyes widen with surprise. "I didn't know anyone was here - how could I 'choose' to visit you?"

"Nevertheless," says the figure, with a soft laugh. Her hand is still extended and the red butterfly settles on it and sits, as it did atop the tall stone, gently waving its wings back and forth.

The young woman doesn't know what to say and so merely stares at the figure.

Wide bands of gold trim her robe, gold sandals adorn her feet, and strands of her knee-length, wavy hair shimmer with a variety of golden tones. Even her skin seems to glow as if dusted with golden particles.

"I am Brigit," says the figure.

"Hi," says the young woman. "I'm confused."

Again Brigit laughs gently. "I have come to show you the world beneath."

"World? Beneath?" says the young woman, with a perplexed frown. "World beneath what?"

"Beneath the one where you live." She turns and glides through the opening in the cavern wall, then turns and gestures for the young woman to follow and, after a moment's hesitation, she does. Instantly the golden light shifts behind them, creating a glowing wall between them and the seaside cavern. The young woman turns her anxious gaze from the wall to Brigit and opens her mouth, but never forms her question, as she sees the vista laid out before them.

A panorama of verdant hills and valleys rolls into the far distance, framed by dense forests on either side. Shiny castles dot the hilltops and cozy dwellings nestle in the valleys. Nearby, a waterfall dances down a low cliff and into a pool of colorful water. Two birds soar from treetops to waterfall to pool and back again. The sky blushes a pale mauve that hints at twilight, but not darkness.

The young woman finally remembers to breathe, and says, "I've never been anywhere like this. It's beyond beautiful". She inhales again. "The air smells so clean and fresh."

"Yes," says Brigit. "It is always Spring here."

They move along a path and, after following a stream for a short distance, begin to climb a gentle hill.

The young woman notices countless butterflies flitting about, all colored in bright, jewel tones – emerald green, the deep blue of lapis lazuli, the shimmering yellow of a yellow diamond, and ruby red ones, like her friend that still rides on Brigit’s hand. She also sees tall, elegant figures on other paths, dressed in robes the same rich colors as the butterflies’ wings.

Glancing at Brigit, the young woman asks, “Are these really fairies? I thought they’d be tiny.”

“In some cultures, they are, but ours are as you see.”

“Ours’? Aren’t you one of them?”

Brigit shakes her head.

“I guess that might explain why your robe is white instead of colored,” says the young woman.

Brigit smiles. “Have you not heard my name in the legends of this country?”

“Yes – but I don’t remember what I heard.”

They have reached the top of the hill and Brigit sits on a bench woven from slim young trees. She gestures for the young woman to sit, and then says, “I am the goddess of knowledge, poetry, and the arts.”

“Knowledge – like, the studies we do in school?”

“Yes. But historically, knowledge also referred to the cultivation of plants and to healing people and inspiring them. That is the form of knowledge we can share today.” She lifts her hand, and the red butterfly rises into the air, circles, then settles on a nearby shrub.

The young woman tilts her head to one side and waits.

After a few moments Brigit says, “You have recently discovered some things about yourself.”

“Discovered some things,” says the young woman, “but also was reminded of others that I had forgotten – and ones I’d ignored because I wasn’t sure what to do about them.”

“And do you know what to do, now?”

“I think so.” The young woman’s voice is hesitant, and she pauses before going on. “You see, I’m a quiet person. I really think that’s a good way to be – for me, anyway. But I’ve also begun to realize that I’m often too accommodating with people.”

“And are you able to express feelings you have toward others?”

The young woman laughs, ruefully. “Often, I’m not even clear what my feelings are at any given moment, so knowing how to act on them is a challenge. Too often I just give in to what others want and then wind up feeling overwhelmed and sad.”

“A moment ago you said that you had some idea what to do about these things.”

“Yes. There are a couple of main issues, though they probably connect to each other. The sadness I sometimes feel... well, depression has run in my family, so I ought to be aware of that fact and of the things that seem to trigger my sadness – and I need to be on guard against unhealthy ways of coping with it. But I also just learned that some medication I’ve taken for many years might possibly contribute.”

“And so if you stop taking it, you can see if it might cause the sadness?” asks Brigit.

“Yes, though it may take some time to find out. Since I’ve taken it for so long, it could take my body and brain awhile to regain balance.”

“But it sounds like a worthwhile trial.”

The young woman nods.

“You said there were a couple of main issues: discovering the source of your sadness is the first. What else?”

“Oh, the whole lack-of-assertiveness thing.” The young woman sounds frustrated.

“Sometimes it seems a little late to try and learn that skill. Isn’t that something I should have done earlier?”

“Do you cook?”

The young woman stares at her. “Yes, I love to cook. What has that to do with assertiveness?”

“They are both skills – ones that a person can pick up at any age if she has the willingness to work at it.”

“I see what you mean,” says the young woman. She stares out at the landscape and thinks for awhile. Finally she says, “But in order to be assertive, I need to know what to be assertive about - where I’m headed, what I want for my life - and those things are not always clear to me. I’m not sure how to do one without the other.”

Brigit smiles. “You must have heard the old question, ‘Which came first, the chicken or the egg?’”

The young woman nods but gives her a questioning look.

“Well, it is not so much a matter of figuring out how one can come before the other, but of recognizing the paradox – that they must exist simultaneously.”

“I don’t understand.”

“In your case, at the same time that you work at defining the life you want in larger terms, you also work at becoming more assertive, gradually. You might start with seemingly smaller things that already exist in your life. For instance, if you find it difficult to choose where to go to dinner with your friends, have someone give you a list of two or three, and then you choose from that reduced list.”

The young woman smiles and then laughs. “Sounds pretty basic when you describe it that way – but I see what you mean. I don’t have to become an entirely different person – like some warrior princess leading her troops into battle. I can start small and define what’s important to me and my life, as I go along.”

“Exactly.”

“They have groups that meet and work on assertiveness. I could do that or I could work with a counselor or I could do some reading.”

“Or you could do all three,” says Brigit.

“Or I could do all three.”

Brigit stands and gestures for them to move back down the path. The red butterfly ruffles its wings and springs into the air ahead of them.

“You have so many strengths,” says Brigit. “You are smart and pretty. I know you had some early success in athletics that became side-tracked by injury. As painful as that was - to body, mind, and spirit - you moved on and applied your great intelligence to studies and life-growth. That intelligence will support you now as you work at these more recent challenges. You are a delightful star and will only shine brighter.”

The young woman smiles and ducks her head, as her face turns a soft shade of pink.

They are silent as they pass the gurgling waterfall, on their way back to the glowing cavern wall. After a few moments, Brigit says, “May I make one other suggestion?”

“Of course.”

“Do you know the phrase *anam cara*?”

“No. What does it mean?”

“It comes from the Celtic tradition. *Anam* is the old Gaelic word for ‘soul’ and *cara* is the word for ‘friend.’ *Anam cara*, then, means ‘soul friend’ Traditionally, it was someone who acted as a teacher, companion, or spiritual guide. Today we recognize it as someone with whom you can share who you really are – the thoughts and feelings deep inside your mind and heart.”

“You mean like a soul mate?”

“Not exactly. ‘Soul mate’ seems to suggest your life partner – and while some may find an *anam cara* in their mate, it can put a heavy load on the already-complex relationship of marriage. I refer more to a girlfriend or sister - someone you might consider your best friend.”

“I see.”

“And if, at present, your *anam cara* has not yet appeared, stay on the lookout. Whoever it is will contribute immeasurable levels of joy and support in your life.”

“What a lovely suggestion,” says the young woman. “Thank you.” Then, glancing at the glowing cavern wall, she says, with light humor in her voice, “Wait a minute – I always heard that humans can’t leave once they visit Fairyland.”

“That is only legend,” answers Brigit, “though some have chosen to stay.”

“I don’t suppose I could come back here sometime.” The young woman’s tone is hesitant and questioning.

“Perhaps. This cavern isn’t the only opening to this world. Any place of quiet and beauty – forests, rivers, lakes, mountain caves – can harbor a gateway. Keep your eyes and your spirit open and who knows.”

Brigit leads the way through the glowing light of the cavern wall. On the other side waits a large elegant white horse. She mounts and sits tall, her robe and long hair rippling and flowing down the horse’s flanks. The golden light stays with her. She smiles down at the young woman and says, “Be well, daughter of the sea god.”

“What did you call me?”

“Your name comes from legend and means ‘daughter of the sea god’. I shall give him your regards when I reach the island.”

“Island?”

Brigit gestures seaward, and the young woman notices for the first time a small island some distance off shore. Though a sheer, grey mist has risen, the island seems to float in a bubble of golden light. “Where did that come from?” she asks. “It wasn’t there before.”

“It is called Tir na nOg,” says Brigit. “It is an extension of the Otherworld you just visited, but can only be approached across the water.” She eases her horse a few steps down toward the sea, then turns and smiles in farewell.

The young woman, too, smiles, but then freezes and her eyes and mouth open wide.

The horse has stepped out onto the water, as if it were a solid surface. As horse and rider move swiftly across the water toward the island, the golden light from the cavern wall leaves a lighted swath. The young woman turns and runs back up the path to keep them in sight. Soon, nearing the island, they disappear under the waves for a few moments, and then emerge onto dry land. Brigit lifts one hand in farewell.

The young woman, too, raises her hand, just as the golden bubble dissolves and the island disappears into the mist. “Amazing,” she mutters. After several moments she turns toward the road and her car, though the ground mist has thickened and she can see neither. As she stops to get her bearings, the red butterfly lands on her shoulder. She smiles, and a moment later the butterfly circles her twice, then flies straight upward. At once the mist dissolves and her car appears. As she crosses the field toward it, she sees two birds soar over the fairy mound and dance in the air.

“*Anam cara*,” she says. “Soul friends.”

Sources: In this metaphorical story, information on Brigit came from 2 volumes of Joseph Campbell’s *The Masks of God - Primitive Mythology and Occidental Mythology* and from *The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Mythology*, by Arthur Cotterell and Rachel Storm. John O’Donohue’s *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* provided the concept of *anam cara*. Legends of Irish fairies, fairy mounds, Tir na nOg, and the Otherworld came from the Cotterell/Storm book, as well as from various websites, including shee-aire.com and nzghosts.co.nz/irish_ghosts. Meaning of the name was found in the *Character Naming Sourcebook*, by Sherrilyn Kenyon.