

Clemency

by Samuel Morgan

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It was icy cold outside. The moon had risen above the wooded hill-line and spread her milky light upon the gently rippling waters of a high tide. The stars, mostly hidden, waited in the wings as a gentle luminescence took centre-stage. His father's boat floated in the inky pool of firmament's faint reflection, the Milky Way Ferris-wheeling about its mast. Tethered to a mooring, it watched the moon sail the night sky, lusting for oceans of its own to cross.

It was still plenty dark, and with one face forever veiled, the moon knew darkness well. From the heavens she crept into Earth's darkest corners, imbuing shadows with an otherworldly radiance. Purple-tinged blackness took form, as boundaries between worlds dissolved.

In my own labyrinthine depths, will she find me also? he had wondered several hours earlier, peering out at the estuary from the warmth of the lounge, hands and forehead resting on cool glass. Just before he turned to survey his modest preparations: the fire and candles lit; a lone joss stick infusing the room with exotic promise; his laptop connected to the HiFi, colouring the space with trippy, tribal sounds. Before his parents left to some neighbour's New Year's Eve party that no, he was sure he didn't want to attend. Before the dancing-alone but not lonely. Before the singing, sat by the fire. The laughter. The impressions: other characters filling the room, so quirky, realistic, and fun! Before a globule of forbidden fruit descended the oesophageal road of no return. Before time and space became purple-tinged and gloopy. Before inhibition fled. Before his parents returned, drunk and

merry. Before he sat with his father and, for the first time, heard him share; open and lucid.

The clatter and thump of the front door closing was like the ripping of space-time itself. Through the man-sized slit, he stepped into another world entirely. One of unutterable silence—penetrating, piercing, almost deafening. A silence *alive*. With the inaudible singing of every *thing*—every plant, pebble, and tree—as it bathed in Mother Moon’s opalescent aura.

“Go see the moon,” his parents had said with peculiar insistence. Fire safe, and himself wrapped up warm, he could now enjoy this other world. A world that had been brewing, awaiting his arrival—he knew it.

What a wonderful new year, he thought, pulling his scarf a little tighter and making his way up the garden path. *You waited patiently, and here I am.* He felt *aware*—and calmer than he’d felt in a long time. He passed under a natural arch of some creeper or shrub his father had trained about a now-invisible frame and paused, looking up at its thin twigs and stems: winter bare, densely knotted, a spiralling matrix that resembled the weave of a giant bird’s nest. He felt the garden, the world itself, to be a nest in some magical crystal kingdom, himself nestled at its base under the incubating lunar glow. He felt safe. And warm despite the hour and season. But for his dissipating breath, all was frozen still.

His father’s frosted car was parked past the gate leading to the pavement. Standing beside it, he slowly surveyed the crystal web of moonlight cast upon the Earth. Her light was held in every frozen drop and flake of water—little crystalline receivers to a song transmitted from her distant, heavenly perch.

"They didn't want to know me," he sombrely repeated to himself. His father's words. Words that rasped on the crisp air and made it only colder. In one crystal-shattering instant, everything was accepted, forgiven. He understood the defences—his father's and his own. That ogre of a man, always swinging erratically between morose silence and frightful anger, now a person and someone who deserved his love.

"Who doesn't deserve my love?" he asked himself now.

Looking at the frost-encrusted car, he ran a fingernail down the nearest window. It left a narrow line revealing a dark space within and filled his finger with a pleasant, numbing coolness.

As he withdrew his hand, something further cracked within. Tears filled his eyes, and somehow his legs gave way. He dropped to the pavement as if gravity, usually so steadfast and serene, had thrown a tantrum and stuck him down. There, lying curled up by a tyre-arch, looking up at the sky, a domed ribcage of wispy cloud, he *felt*—and with that, *understood*—his father's pain.

I never felt wanted, he thought, then whispered over and over. It's doubtful his father could ever have imagined he'd pass that very energy on to his son. But so often growing up he had felt a sense of abandonment and exclusion. A lack of worth. And for no good reason. But that's what happens, isn't it? For generations, if needs be. When a feeling is locked within, unexamined, and we think we've controlled or tamed it but really only maim ourselves or those we love.

"What you look at disappears; what you resist persists." A quote he'd read someplace, now whispered within.

On the hard gravel under the loving moon, he wanted to look. And so he cried, determined to feel. To *feel* it all. To be done with it.

The moon didn't stray from her graceful passage through the heavens. She already touched the world, and him in it, holding both in her pearly presence. For that, he was grateful. There, beneath her, felt the most healing place to cry, and she let him. She'd seen it all before. Even from the darkness of her other side. Especially there.

He shifted a little on the pavement, closer now to a holly bush beside the gate. "I never felt wanted," he said, this time speaking aloud those acrid but oddly cathartic words. The breath that carried them was warm, of course, and he noticed how the words melted a little of the frost on the leaves closest to him, freeing the moon's trapped light and, at once, her song. He heard it; he really did.

Back on his feet now, looking at the thorny, defensive leaves, he pushed himself into them, clasping whatever part his reaching hands touched first. They bit his flesh. But it was good. It fitted somehow.

Squatting, bringing a handful of leaves with him, he felt them resist, then surrender, a branch whipping back and away. Knees to chest, vision blurred, he looked at his hand and the several captured leaves protruding there. He brought one to his mouth and bit. He winced at the bitterness. Thorns on soft, chilled lips. *No more shutting down and closing off*, he thought. *No more handbrakes on in my life.*

"What isn't felt is only trapped"—another quote he'd read, another whisper.

He knew he was crying for his father as much as for himself.
Crying away the pain.

He looked through the open gate. At the lanceolate foliage flanking the path to home's front door. Then, at the rest of the garden. His father's garden. It was beautiful. He remembered how green-fingered his father was and wondered how much of his creating and tending was fuelled by pain. How much poison he'd turned to buddleia and cherry blossom. Not just gardening but in the wooden models he sometimes made, his drawings, or the sailing he loved to do. Creating to fill a void? Covering the sense of rejection? Mortar to the walls of some castle keep.

It was almost done; he knew it. He was coughing, dribbling, like a down-and-out tramp. *Jeez*, if someone could see me. Coughing up the last hairballs—psychological trauma; denied aspects, once swallowed, long suppressed. *Chew on the gravel*, he thought, feeling the ground sting his palms and knees. *Maybe that will do it*. He didn't, of course.

He stopped crying. Just a few snivels now. His attention was gripped by the image of an ex-girlfriend that had come to mind like a phantom coalescing from his vaporous breath. And, with it, he was glimpsing something she'd tried to show him—how she'd only been in his life to love him and help him blossom. And how he'd not allowed her to do so. Memories, once just colourful sand always slipping between fingers, now solidified into something he could mould.

He was seeing the reason people came together: to help each other heal. He thought of his parents: two wounded characters he'd so raged at as a teenager when he'd never felt listened to. Two people carrying each other home. The idea filled his being with

lightness and hope. Then irrational fear: Would he ever allow it for himself?

The fear passed, and he felt a kind of delayed love for his ex-girlfriend—a love he'd been too blind to notice or express at the time. He missed her and now mourned her loss. Tears. Gratitude. Too late. Just a fantasy of love, perhaps.

What an amazing woman my mother must be, he thought. To have chosen my father to support. To help him heal his pain. To make him feel...wanted.

He wiped away the last of his tears and picked himself up. It was done. Time to go inside. Time to stop hiding. Running. Searching. Or whatever it was he always did. Time to unlock the castle gatehouse, or dismantle its walls. But right now, time for sleep.

His shoes and many layers relinquished, he walked up the stairs to his room opposite his parents'. Reaching the penultimate step, he heard the slightly panicked voice of his mother saying something unintelligible, then, raising her voice, "We're asleep." Twice she said it, in rapid succession. In that classic caught-in-the-act, only-making-it-more-obvious type way. He had to laugh as he turned about, too happy to be embarrassed. He'd sleep in the lounge. By fire's rutilant glow.

It was a surprise, but it seemed appropriate somehow—or at least, a fitting contrast: his writhing on aculeate asphalt and biting at thorns, their... making love? He'd never caught them in the venereal act before, thankfully. Though, as he thought about it now, it might have done him good. Or at least if they'd talked about sex. Yes, a much better option. Less stigma, less fear that way. He'd been a skittish, afeared young man in that regard. The one sex

education class at school hadn't helped much—and the internet had still been in its infancy.

He smiled, recalling the time as a 14 years old he'd bought a *Kama Sutra: Improve your sex life* VHS for couples from some bric-a-brac market stall. How he'd only dared watch a few minutes of it, even when no one was in the house. Then proceeded to take a spade and bury it at the bottom of the garden. Why he hadn't just put it in the neighbours' dustbin if he wanted to get rid of it, he didn't know. Or throw it away somewhere else. Perhaps it was symbolic of some odd repression. He wondered now if his father had ever found it, what with all the landscaping he used to do. What a peculiar find that must have been.

Snuggling down to sleep was put on hold when he remembered the Chinese lantern he'd brought with him from London. *Lighting it will cap the night off nicely*, he thought, getting to his feet.

Outside, he held it for several minutes as the air warmed within the tissue-paper shell, flickering with caramel light. He soon felt it tugging, wanting to rise. When he thought it would make it past the roof, he let it go, but not before imaging he'd psychically attached the last of his and his father's pain to it.

Into the still, cold night it soared. To the haunting cry of some unknown bird, or spirit, in the distant woodland. And to someone shouting. A happy cry. "Yes!", perhaps. It sure sounded like his father, but how could he have seen the lantern? Perhaps some part of him had, and was relieved to see old baggage rise away like that. Or perhaps it had been his mother all those years ago who'd found that Karma Sutra tape and... he swiftly nipped that thought in the blushing bud.

Up, up the lantern flew. A new star amongst a multitude. Old light, marking the way for new, brighter journeys ahead.

Crystal Kingdom (Alternative ending to Clemency)

Back in the lounge, he curled up beside the fire: a nest of orange-red coals, a fresh hatch of phoenix eggs blanketed beneath a thin veil of grey ash. Wonderful flashbacks from the evening effervesced from memory, physically jolting him each time. The dancing about the lounge. His singing by the fire. But mostly how his father had sat with him and spoken of his childhood.

He'd cried. He'd felt a burden lift. But knew there was still work to do. The subtle brace about his being, still in place? The gnawing sadness often felt, still lurking in the shadows? The urge to flee from relationships; still be there also? *No matter*, he told himself. *Tonight was important*. He'd begun the work. A minute later: *Besides, who doesn't carry 'baggage' anyway? Who can claim they are totally whole and healed?* Perhaps what matters is accepting things as they are...

He settled down to sleep again. The carpet a hard but welcome 'mattress'. His winter coat his duvet. It was easy to feel cosy by the fire.

Then, in that twilight zone between sleep and wakefulness, the memory of a fairy tale his mother always read to him as a child came to mind with startling, delightful clarity.

First he saw the central character; a young prince living alone in a palace made of crystal. Then, he remembered the task he'd been set by his father: the capture of a magical

bird that had been prophesied to protect the future of their kingdom. Next he saw the old witch had been behind that. Her haggard frame and shrill voice had always sent shivers down his spine as a child, whenever his mother got to that part of the story. The prince had caught the bird, he remembered that much. And it had lived in a golden cage in his chambers, singing sweetly, or so the prince thought. But it only lived a year, and each new year he had to catch another. And the boy lived all alone. Safe, but all alone. And the clarity faded as quickly as it had come, and he just lay there listening to the crackles of the fire for a while.

Then the details of the fairytale unfurled from his mind like a carpet seller unrolling some dusty tapestry and displaying it to customer. I was that customer, transfixed, the touch of my fingers on woven threads sparking recall. All the while I pined for sleep, and sleep remained evasive.

Apart from some guards who manned the palace walls, the boy lived alone. Every night—and for a reason he either couldn't remember, or maybe it was never part of the story—people pounded on the gatehouse doors, furious. The palace was sparse and as cold as a catacomb, and in the day, the boy wandered its cavernous and empty chambers, read reports of nightly raids upon his keep, and ordered his guards to build stronger defences and higher walls. Of course, his enemies would always come with more destructive weapons and longer ladders.

There's something in that, he thought: more defences, more attacks...

Something that spoke to him now. The fire popped all of a sudden, spitting sparks towards the chimney.

He pictured the palace—fine, smooth walls splintering sunlight like a prism and resounding eerily in some minor key—and then the prince; just a boy: his wide, imploring smile; his handsome features, framed by a thick crop of coppery hair that flowed about his shoulders like lace curtains by an open window; the purple cloak he wore, with buttons made of amethyst; his soft red slippers...

Slippers... He remembered the slippers his mother would buy him each autumn as a child. She was always worried about him catching a chill in the old, draughty Victorian house they lived in. She liked to worry. In the story the prince didn't need firmer footwear, he remembered. He never left the palace—he feared the dark and fierce world outside its thick, sheltering walls. It probably wasn't so dark and fierce, of course.

The prince's eyes, he saw those next. Eyes that shone dully. Some sadness staining their jet-black, cerulean-rimmed centres like a dark cloud obscuring the sun.

Lying on his back, he lolled his head to the side and stared at the fire. His gaze slipped between where several coals nestled together, and entered a great, cavern pulsing red, orange and white. *What lurks in there*, he wondered, *afraid to come out*.

Next, he saw the witch again. The one who'd visited the boy's father and given him the prophecy. She'd pounded on the gatehouse door one day with her walking stick made of *Python Pine*—

He smiled. He'd always liked that name as a child, and the way his mother would hiss it theatrically whenever she read it.

No one ever knocked in the daytime; naturally, the boy's father had been intrigued. The long cloak she wore left her face in shadow, but when she'd pulled it back, she had appeared to grow a few inches and was as pretty as any princess. She came seeking gold. She came offering knowledge.

The prince's father had made him memorise her prophetic poem word for word, and...

He shuffled and rolled onto his side; warmth immediately radiating the length of his spine as the fire gently caressed him there. Amazingly, he could remember the poem now, lines of verse appearing one after the other as if his mind was unwrapping an ancient scroll, the text as honey-hazel as the witch's eyes had been in the story. Eyes that were beautiful despite the rest of her appearance. Eyes whose irises swirled like clouds of lustrous orange pollen lifted on a summer breeze.

*Take heed of the bird that arrives on the northern wind.
Be not fooled by the beauty of its rainbow wings.
Upon each pinion beat rides pure malice as down upon your
palace it swoops and sings.
You have only to whistle once and hold out an open hand,
and down from the tallest tower, old milk eyes will land.
Never fail to appear at new year's cresting hour
when day breaks and appears father fire,
or one peck of its beak upon the crystal spire and your
kingdom will shatter and sink in the mire.
Take the bird instead, and house her in a golden cage.
She will sing you sweet lullabies till we turn year's page,
and your kingdom will hold for age after age.*

He smiled, intrigued at such recall of memory. *Is every past experience filed away somewhere in my mind*, he wondered. Or do we

really 'forget' things, forever? Then he doubted he'd remembered it so accurately afterall; perhaps he'd just made it up. He didn't know what would please him more, and he didn't have long to ponder it: scenes from the fairy tale continued to play in his mind as a slideshow:

In one of the palace's many vast and gloomy chambers he often wandered through each day, a painting of an old man hung (long white hair, skin under the eyes, dark and sagging; eyes which, eerily, seemed to follow him as he passed through the room); the golden cage that housed the bird, centre stage on a podium in the princes room; the palace's spartan furnishing (his father had said to keep it that way: fewer things for the marauders to steal if they somehow breached the walls); his mother's death (from a snake bite one time she ventured outside the palace walls); the cold (how fire had begun crackling and hissing dark temptations with it's fiery tentacles, suggesting he not listen to the witch and let the bird free; how he stopped lighting them; how wearing furs beneath his purple robe kept him warm instead; how he'd been happy for his guards to sacrifice many a forest animal for this. A good number of snakes had also been slain, an action born of petty vengeance of which he was no longer proud); and his father's death, of old age.

All too soon, it had become the boy's responsibility alone to capture the bird. Each New Year at first light, on the palace's highest tower. Just as the witch had foretold.

The birds were no ordinary birds. Their feathers coruscated every colour of a painter's palette; their bellies glowed like the blackest night, and they had eyes as white and round as the moon. They sang and sang and never needed feeding—magical birds, a delight to behold. Over time, however, their

feathers would lose their brilliance, their colours bleeding and merging like an artist's watercolour struck by a sudden spring shower. Though their song stayed true and bright, and the boy knew that each New Year another would arrive, the his anxiety would grow.

On the morn of New Year's Eve, the bird would always drop dead in it's cage. Though he had only a day to wait before he caught the next bird, the interlude between birdsongs was always an oppressive, agonising silence for the boy.

The fire crackled expectantly. Perhaps it could see his thoughts. Perhaps it too sought meaning from the fairy tale. More sparks shot up the chimney, like fairies. Fire fairies.

Despite the beauty of the bird's peeps and trills, it was full of sorrow and dreamed of flying free. The boy didn't know this, of course, and at night, its sweet, mellifluous melody drowned out the awful nightly thumping on the gatehouse door and let him sleep.

He'd recalled only fragments of the fairy tale, but he knew that didn't matter. And soon enough, he finally fell asleep.

And he dreamt of the boy. A boy who was now...

A bearded old man. Standing on a parapet staring out at a dark tangle of forest that stretches as far the eye can see. He wears the same purple coat and red slippers as the boy. The faint crepuscular light fades; darkness swallows the scene.

The same spot, but lighter now. Another time. The old man looks weary.

A bird perches on his callused palm, peering at him with beady, white eyes. They flick black a moment as it blinks, and there: the man's own reflection.

Another blink: the image of a hunched figure in a long cloak, face in shadow, hands poised about the hood.

Another blink: a ghastly, haggard face. *The witch?*

The old man raises a hand to his face. Fingers gently probe his wizened features. *The boy?*

A distant hammer and thump; people struggling at his palace gate.

Dawn's light fast swelling on the horizon.

His other hand. The bird still stood there.

One stiff and swollen finger gently strokes its pretty crest, then smooths the feathers on its back.

The horizon. There he fixes his gaze.

The beat of wings.

A shadow streaks the sky.

His hand: *empty!*—a moment's panic, swallowed.

Sunbeams blind.

An almighty crack.

A smile.

His kingdom shakes, and shakes, and shakes and...

"Wakey, wakey. What a drunkard."

It was his mother's voice. He half-opened his eyes to see an arm retracting from the hollow of his shoulder.

"Urghh... what?"

"We're going for lunch. It's almost twelve. You need to shower," she said, whipping the curtains open.

"Ah, Mum!" he protested weakly, blinking himself awake. "It's New Year's Day!"

"I know, dear," she said, now opening a window. "Your father wants to treat us to lunch." His mother liked to air the house each

morning. He felt the air gently stir about him and sweeten, and noticing birdsong coming from the garden, he smiled.

He rolled onto his back, and stared at the ceiling, not feeling so different than if he were lying in the rubble of a shattered palace—his body ached horribly.

Eating out? he thought. His father rarely suggested such treats.

He thought of the boy and the magical bird. His smile widened, and... he sighed. He then yawned and stretched his arms wide, shifting in the debris of his nearly forgotten dream.

"Fly free, bird," he whispered. "Fly free".

He drew a deep breathe, then let the air wheeze out slowly between his dry lips. *I won't rebuild those palace walls*, he thought, incanting the words within. He rolled onto his side, then pushed himself up.