

The Wild Ride

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Not so very long ago, not so very far away, a young ghost named Eilidh drifted about her family's farm.

Eilidh's body had died, and she found she had a great deal to get used to. Eilidh could no longer lift the latch of the wooden kitchen door - her fingers slipped right through it! Then she found that she did not actually have to open the door to go outside to play, she slipped right through the door as well! But Eilidh felt cold, too, and could not put on a sweater or feel the warmth from the sunshine or fireplace.

Eilidh generally stayed near her family's farmhouse, walking over the ground she had walked over when she was alive. She accompanied her brother when he filled the woodbox. She walked beside her little sister when Susan fed the goats. "I'm sorry I can't help," she would say, but they couldn't hear.

Although Eilidh could not help her family with chores, still she could enjoy the best thing with them. Eilidh still sat beside her grandmother's rocking chair as evening crept over the farm and listened to Granny tell stories. When Eilidh had first died, Granny had told stories about her, and Eilidh liked to listen to them.

As the weeks passed, and her family worked in the field and swam in the pond, Eilidh noticed that she couldn't quite hear as well as she used to; as if her ears were plugged up from a cold, voices sounded muffled and the noises about the farm were unclear. Eilidh couldn't quite see as clearly as she used to. A thin fog had formed around everything she looked at.

“Let’s turn the wheel,” her father said very early one summer morning, and the whole family joined him in the field to begin the harvest. That night, when the rest of the family feasted on fresh corn, Eilidh could not smell or taste it. She sat beside her little sister that evening, though, watching Susan make dollies out of corn husks and red yarn.

The weeks turned to months, and the fog around things grew thicker. Eilidh had to pay very close attention to watch her mother and Susan putting up the jars and jars of ripe tomatoes and fruit preserves. The colors were not nearly as bright as she had remembered, and she had to spend more and more attention on keeping her self above the floor. She had to strain to hear her mother’s voice. “This is how we turn the wheel,” Mama told Susan, just as she had explained to Eilidh in years past.

Eilidh was becoming afraid. What if the mist grew and grew until she was all alone in a cloud of cold white silence? Eilidh did not want to be alone.

If she were very close to Granny, though, Eilidh could still listen to the stories in the evening. Granny began again to tell stories about Eilidh herself, and that helped her pay attention. One morning she watched her grandmother in the kitchen mixing, kneading, and baking bread. Granny filled a basket with apples, a small loaf, a piece of cheese wrapped in a napkin, and a few cookies. Susan reached for one of the cookies, and Granny swatted her hand away. “No you don’t, Susie, that’s for Eilidh!”

Eilidh didn’t know what to make of that. She hadn’t been able to eat or even touch anything in a very long time, it seemed. Then she saw her brother carving pumpkins to put on the porch - today was Samhain! Summer’s end, that meant, and parading with masks to the neighbors’ houses for treats, flickering lights on everyone’s front steps, leaving food for the wild riders in the night, and windows shuttered tight well before midnight.

Granny placed that basket on the front porch as Susan and the others came giggling back from their parade. She shooed them all inside, scolding like a mother hen. Then she stood a moment, her knitted shawl pulled about her round shoulders. She spoke softly, so softly that Eilidh could only tell she had spoken by watching her mouth. "Fair travels, Eilidh." Granny turned and stepped into the thick white mist of the house, pulling the heavy wooden door shut behind her.

Fair travels. Eilidh had peeked outside the window in years before on Samhain, seeing darkness and hearing rain, but she had never stepped out after Granny or her parents had shut the doors and windows. Fair travels, Granny had said. Eilidh decided to stay on the porch, at least for a while, and see what there was to see.

She was very curious about the basket of food. She knew she could not pick up an apple, but she reached out her hand and tried anyway. As she had guessed, her fingers slipped through the apple - but she *could* grasp the spirit of the apple! Hungrily she bit, and tasted, and ate the good things her Granny had placed in the basket for her.

Suddenly, Eilidh turned. After weeks of hearing things muffled and distant, she heard one clear sound from the forest, growing louder and louder every second. The sound of baying hounds filled her ears, and soon the thunder of hundreds of hoofbeats followed behind.

The Wild Ride!

Eilidh felt afraid and excited at the same time! Always before, she and her sister and brothers had hidden under covers, safely behind the shutters on Samhain, sound asleep by midnight - or if they did hear some soft noise in the night, Granny or one of her parents sat nearby to quiet them and keep the windows shut. But now! Now, Eilidh was outdoors, out where she would see the Ride!

The hounds raced into view, red-eared dogs running and baying and chasing over hill and farm and countryside. Eilidh saw them as clearly as anything she had ever seen when she was alive - each hound's white fur shining in the moonlight. Then, like some great storm breaking, the riders streamed over the crest of the hill. Horses whose hooves struck sparks, helmeted warriors and long-robed visions and at their head - Eilidh gasped when she saw - the Lord of the Wild.

His wind-paced horse, his long velvet cloak seemed made from the darkness of night itself. In the moonlight, Eilidh could see, clear as day, a great rack of antlers sprouting from his head like a crown. He stood in the stirrups, encouraging his mount to breakneck speed. His eyes grazed the whole country around, and lit on Eilidh. He looked her straight in the eye, as no one had done since she died, and Eilidh heard his deep voice in her heart. "Come, child."

The riders filled the farmyard now with raucous sound and flashing of silver at their stirrups and belts, riding past her like a flood, past the barn, down toward the village. They were passing her by, and Eilidh felt a strange wrench inside her heart; she wanted very much to ride with them, to feel and see and hear again and to feel strong and well - and she wanted to stay with her family.

Fair travels, Granny had said. And Eilidh stepped out, off her porch, toward the Ride. A woman spotted her, rode close to the house, shifted her weight, and extended a strong arm toward Eilidh.

Without even time to say "Goodbye," Eilidh reached up and grasped the hand, solid and strong, and felt herself swung up onto the back of the horse. The horse's body heaved beneath her and the woman before her felt warm as Eilidh held tightly to her middle. She clung desperately and rode like the wind through her village and down the valley. She saw the spirits

in the graveyard join the Ride, the spirits of the trees that had fallen, the thousands of animals of field and forest and farm. The Wild Ride raged all night westward over the world.

Hours and hours she rode in thunder and motion, finally seeing a light up ahead toward which the hounds and riders raced. Eilidh turned her face backward, to look her last at the green Earth - now white with thick mist. Finally, finally, the horse flashed through a gate, wheeled, and stopped. Eilidh felt herself lifted and set down shakily on the ground by the gate. The horses blew and stamped all around her and she felt the eyes of the riders upon her. Still she stared backward at Earth, and felt cold tears stream down her cheeks.

Silence finally fell. A warm hand touched her shoulder. A deep voice sounded near her ear. "Child," he said, "turn the wheel."

She reached out and touched the mist. She drew it like a curtain across the gateway.

And she felt sunshine on her shoulders.