

## A BOG; A BLAZE

by Katherine White

*Sunhigh.12 BCE. Chauci Territory, modern-day Netherlands.*

They had always said she was wrong. She was a curse, a mistake, a waste. As the bitter winter sun rose its weary way over the bleak landscape she knew so well, she felt no tender feelings, no warm thrill of comfort. All she felt was guilt, and self-hatred. This recent hardship, and all misfortune for that matter, came right back to her, like a particularly clingy dog. It was a truth which had settled itself deep inside her heart. All she had been taught, from the moment she could struggle to her feet, was how much of a burden she was. Everything was her fault. She was twisted. Unnatural. Even her name scorned her. The kinder tribemates called her Laminjo. *Cripple.*

Most spat and cursed her as Ubila. *Evil one.*

As Laminjo stared into the deep, ancient bog in front of her, something plucked a memory free from her mind, forcing her to relive it. The honey-sweet stink of crow-pecked flesh, the screaming of the metal-clad soldiers, the thundering of uncountable horses with their crazed eyes rolling and their sides heaving, the faces of everyone she had ever known either glazed and bloodied, never to move again, or fixed in cruel masks of accusation and blazing fury. Her mind drowned in the murky bog-water of her memories.

Laminjo could remember their oaths and curses as they fled the carnage.

“You brought this upon us!” they had snarled.

“Forsaken of the gods!” they had roared.

The tribe had run until their winter camp was nothing more than an ember, ablaze in the thick forest canopy. They watched the smoke climb into the sky, and they seethed. The small children cried into their mothers’ thick woollen cloaks, the elders muttered into their furs, and what was left of the warriors tugged at their mail and struck the ground with their spears

in wordless frustration and shame. The gods had abandoned them - merely sat aside as the Roman scum forced them out onto the bleak bogland.

A crow's guttural croak snapped Laminjo from her guilty reverie, dragging her back to reality with its hoarse lament. She looked up. The sun had long reached the peak of its daily toil. Stood beside the great bog, she could see her tribemates, snaking their determined way down the ancient hillside like a great trail of ants returning to their ailing queen. Watching the procession edge closer and closer, Laminjo picked at her woollen cape. She rarely wore such fine clothes. She looked to the crow which had startled her. Laminjo had always had a fondness for the bedraggled creatures. To everyone else, they were carrion-eaters, bad omens. To her, they were kindred spirits.

Her tribemates were closer now. Rush torches were lit to ward off the gathering darkness. The acrid reek of burning lard was suppressed by the ever-advancing fog, which rolled in layers down the hillside, progressing faster than a child could run. Or faster than Laminjo could run, anyway.

The procession was closer still. They no longer appeared as a trail of ants, but rather, in Laminjo's fog-addled mind, as an inordinately vast, ancient, vengeful wyrm with blazing specks for eyes and score after score of howling voices.

As the warriors had looked down at her slight, knotted shape, they had spoken of glory, of valour. They sang songs of praise. Not for her, but for her new mistress. Laminjo was nothing but a vessel. She carried hope, just as the amphorae of those hated Romans carried the promise of blissful ignorance, if only for a moment.

As the elders had gazed with scorn toward her twisted trunk of a body, they had hissed. She should be thankful. This would be the most useful thing she had ever done for her tribe. It was her wyrd - her destiny.

As the women had brushed her long blonde hair until it fell in rivers down her uneven shoulders, they had whispered of wonderful things, of bountiful afterlife.

As the children had fixed her woollen cloak around her slanted neck, they had praised her. Baduhenna's handmaiden. The lady of war's prize. Her twisted little coil of rope.

Remembered only by the blazing bog-asphodel which grows over her body.

Now and for all time.

*3<sup>rd</sup> January 1941 CE. Düsseldorf, Germany.*

Time had not been kind to Lina. As she got older, she had watched her father withdraw into his bottle — his temper building up like a gathering tempest, seen her mother's resolve slowly fracture, and - above all - felt her spine twist even more, crumbling under the weight of a growing teenage girl.

She knew that she was a burden, despite Mami's denials. Lina could see it in her face whenever Papi lashed out. Lina was her parents' only surviving child. The others, those who may have stood up straight or been able to run around with the other children had been claimed by Death's bony hands. On those dark days where Papi unleashed his temper, or when Lina had another attack of pain, she could sense that Mami secretly wished that Death had claimed her poor daughter too.

It was difficult enough to support a regular family on a factory worker's salary, but with Lina's condition, it was impossible. Mami took up work cooking for a rich lawyer who lived on the other side of town, and at the weekends, Lina worked in the storage room of the nearest department store. Not the front desk. People like Lina were not exactly the best ambassadors for a business.

It was not enough to make ends meet. It was never enough.

It was like a divine boon, then, when the man came.

He had looked very proper, with a sombre dark grey suit (which Lina judged to be of superior quality). He wore a fine-looking homburg, with a navy band — the only splash of colour in his whole outfit. His trousers looked new and little-worn, and he had a silver tie pin. Very few people still presented an image of such dapper affluence in this time of war, especially not the honest, working folks.

All in all, not the sort of man you would usually see in this part of town.

Lina had a sharp mind to make up for her shortcomings at all things physical, and she had learned the harsh truths of human nature long before. It was the only way to muddle along in the kill-or-be-killed, survival-of-the-fittest nature of the education system. Kids could sniff out weakness a mile away. Not everyone is an angel. Lina had learned this the hard way.

It was natural, then, that Lina's mother sent her out of the room when the man came. Her daughter was not exactly the perfect picture of politeness when it came to strangers. Or the perfect picture when it came to anything, really.

As she sat on the floor of their scruffy second room, Lina pressed her ear to the crack in the door. Mami and the stranger were keeping their voices down, as they knew full well the tricks of inquisitive children, but she could still make out the occasional exchange. Her mother would say something, defiance tingeing her voice, and the man would snap back, a low and threatening quality to his words. Lina thought it was about Papi. He had long avoided signing up to fight, hiding behind a claim of poor health - he had once been a miner, and his lungs were not as healthy as they should have been.

But it could not be a man come to conscript Papi. Mami would not argue if it was. The topic had grown to be a sore one between her parents — Mami constantly snapped at Papi for his cowardice. Besides, he could earn a more consistent salary through the forces.

Abruptly, the door between the rooms opened with a creak before juddering to a halt. Caught in the act of eavesdropping, Lina looked up guiltily at her mother, expecting a harsh clip around the ear.

Mami had been crying,

She tried to hide it, but her eyes were red and puffy.

“Now, Liebling,” her mother began, her face fixed into a mask of calm. “This is Herr Sauer. You're going to go with him. He will take you to a place where you can progress with your treatment.”

Lina narrowed her eyes. Mami never called her *Liebling*. Her mother was from the Netherlands, and she had tried to keep her native culture strong in her daughter. Lina wondered why she chose to make herself seem more German before this stranger.

Herr Sauer smiled, a strange, unhuman smile, like some sort of creature sizing up a new meal. He looked so much like a snake that Lina wondered if he ever blinked.

But Lina, aware of her duties to the façade of decorum, smiled warily and shook his hand. It was clammy, and pale.

He spoke, well-mannered, and with a distinctly well-to-do accent. “Hello Lina. There is nothing to be afraid of. We will treat you well at Hadamar. We specialise in patients with... conditions like yours.”

The pause was barely detectable, but it was there. Lina looked at her mother, but she gave no emotion away.

“I will see you again, Lina,” Mami whispered. “I will see you again.”

***25<sup>th</sup> January 1941 CE. Hadamar ‘Psychiatric Centre’, Germany.***

Lina knew she would die here. Every day here, more and more children were summoned for their “assessment”, never to return. Even the very young children in the town knew. As she was driven up to the centre in that grey bus with the imbeciles, the epileptics, the crippled and those with uncountable more “hereditary diseases” (as she had heard some of the staff call them) — as she was driven up, she heard the local children yelling horrible things, about murderers, and ovens which baked corpses rather than bread.

When she was finally taken for her ‘assessment’, she had formed a picture in her mind of what they did to the kids.

She imagined them looking like the girl she had seen in that museum in the Netherlands, when she had lived there.

Even then, she had seen herself in that girl.

A mirror through the ages.

Reflected in the bog which was her grave.

*Dusk. 12 BCE. Chauci Territory, modern-day Netherlands.*

The bog would be her grave.

One hundred, one thousand years from now. For now and for ever.

The pain of her twisted spine—

—soothed by the numbing —

— embrace of Death—

—bog-blackened skin—

— peat-reddened hair—

—thick noose drawn tight—

—around the frail neck—

—preserved in peat—

—frozen

in time—

For ages and ages to come.

*25<sup>th</sup> January 1941 CE. Hadamar 'Psychiatric Centre', Germany.*

Come tomorrow, she would have no grave.

Her life—

— scattered in smoke —

—her slight, twisted form—

—crumbled in the blaze—

— Inferno-charred skin—

—flame-braided hair—

—her body, dispersed —

—her name forgotten —

—shackled to a statistic—

Gone in a blink.

---

**Author's Note:**

I have always been interested in bog bodies, ever since seeing a picture of the Tollund Man in a history book when I was younger. When I was looking into different bog bodies for this competition, I came across the Yde Girl— the body of a 16-year-old female found in the Netherlands. As I researched her further, I discovered that she was likely a human sacrifice, and that she was likely chosen as she had a twisted spine and stood at only 4'6" tall.

This immediately reminded me of something I had learned about in school not long ago — Aktion T4. This was a mass murder campaign carried out by the Nazis. It targeted disabled people of all kinds, and the first victims were children. These children were taken away from their families and killed soon after. Their bodies were kept for dissection, or cremated.

What struck me most was that even though disabled people may have been treated better in life (initially) in the 1930s/40s than in the Iron Age, the Yde girl is better preserved, better remembered as an individual, than all those thousands of nameless and faceless children murdered by the Nazis.