

Molly Whuppy

By Corey Flintoff

BEFORE THE TIME OF ARTHUR, a great hunger fell upon the North. When this famine gnawed into its third month, the wife said to Whuppy, "We've too many bellies to fill. Some must go or all must starve." She'd borne eleven bairns and seven still alive, so it only made sense to cull the weak. The parents took their youngest — three dirty, runty girls — dragged them into the dark of the forest, and left them. Whuppy, a kindly man, reckoned they might survive on grubs and berries till the winter came and took them off.

The two eldest of these castaways, eleven and twelve, reasoned the same as their parents: Their little sister was a burden who would likely eat more than she could forage. They also knew that she was fiercer and more cunning than they, and they feared she might get the better of them unless they left her behind.

This girl was named Maol and called Molly. At ten, she looked like an outhouse mop, a short stick topped by a vast tangle of grimy red curls that straggled down her back. While she was snuffling in the leaves for

mushrooms, her sisters clobbered her with a rock, tied her to a tree, and left her to the mercy of whatever creature might find her.

That creature happened to be a magpie, drawn to the spot by the child's mumbled curses as she came to with her hands tied behind her back and a great bleeding lump on her pate. It was only the thick mat of hair that softened the blow and kept her skull from cracking. The bird saw that hair and decided it would make a splendid lining for her nest, a jumble of sticks in a nearby tree. She landed neatly on Molly's head and yanked one of the coppery hairs out by the root. This drove the lass into a storm of curses and threats so vivid that the bird (who was no innocent) could only say, "Tut-tut!" The magpie also reckoned that the child was not so weak as she looked and that it might be better to wait a few days before trying to make a meal by plucking out her glaring eyes.

When the bird returned to her nest, she unwound the curled hair and found it was a full nine ells in length, enough to cushion half her dwelling. The next morning, she went back for another, to be greeted by Molly, who not only cursed and howled, but squirmed and thrashed so that it was a chore to pull the second hair from her head. This hair, when it finally came out, was twice as tangled as the first. One end of it snagged in a bush as the bird flew back to her nest, and it stretched out tight as a bowstring. It was the magpie's turn to curse. The hair was snagged so firmly that no amount of pecking and poking would work it loose. The bird perched on the hair and jumped up and down on it, but no amount of violence would break it.

Eventually, the magpie gave up and decided to go back for another hair. This time, however, Molly was ready. All her thrashing and squirming had allowed her to tear her right hand, skinned and bleeding, from its bonds. She kept that hand behind her back, and when the bird landed on her head, she reached up and snatched it by the neck. Molly had a mind to throttle the creature, but her better sense prevailed and she spoke to it thus: "I'd rather twist off your head and squeeze your guts out your gullet, but I'll spare your life if you'll pick the knots that are holding me to this tree." The bird, whose eyes were bulging, gave a little croak of assent. Keeping a firm grasp around the magpie's middle, Molly shifted it behind her back. The sisters' knots were tight, but laughably simple for the bird. Magpies are known for their skill with knots, both tying and untying, and

they have a secret knot that they pass down among themselves, a knot that only another magpie can untie.

As soon as the girl was free, she thought of breaking her promise, wringing the creature's neck, and gobbling its giblets for whatever nourishment they might provide. But her better sense prevailed. She plucked another of her own hairs, tying one end to the bird's leg and the other around her own knobby wrist. "It may be," she said, "that you and I may be of use to each other." The magpie could have undone this knot as well, but she thought she might bide with the girl and see if any food came her way. She perched on Molly's shoulder, grumbling and telling her rude gossip about all the forest creatures as they went along. Unfortunately, this colorful narrative was lost on the child, as it was all in magpie.

From time to time, the magpie flew up into a tree to scout, so it was only a matter of time until she spotted Molly's two sisters, who had scared up a hedgehog and were trying to jab it to death with their sticks.

Molly acted as if she understood nothing of her sisters' treachery, and only apologized to them for having gotten behind. They marveled at the bird, with its black cowl and snowy belly, its blue-shimmering wings and elegant tail. They would have snatched it if it hadn't hissed and bloodied their fingers.

The three girls finished off the hedgehog and Molly divided it into three equal portions, giving the head and forepaws to her eldest sister, the middle to her next sister, and taking the hinder part to herself. "The buttohole for me," she said, "for I am the smallest and least deserving." The haunches of the hedgehog are the meatiest part, so Molly and the bird were well content.

That night, the sisters covered themselves with leaves and lay down to sleep. The magpie perched on a branch over Molly's head. The bird was a fitful sleeper owing to her fear of owls, one of which had gutted her mate in a midnight attack. Her wariness made her a good watch animal in case the elder sisters tried any more tricks.

The next day, the children climbed the spruce-bristled mountainside and crossed over a stony ridge. They slipped and slid down the scree on the other side until they came to a gushing stream. This they followed until it plunged into the River Hinge, a set of rock-studded rapids at the bottom of a deep gorge. At the edge of the gorge was a great hut made of wattle and

daub, thatched over with reeds. From that hut came a smell that made them all tremble. It was the aroma of boiling meat. Judging by the height of the doorframe, the girls knew that this must be the dwelling of some monstrous creature, but their desperation for food overcame their fear. They crept up to the threshold and called out: "Bless this house, so rich and holy! Mercy upon us poor children, for we are fit to starve."

A woman pushed aside the elk hide that curtained the door and put her head out. The girls were relieved to see she was a human, no bigger than their own mother. The woman was surprised to see the three spindly, dirt-brown creatures and thought they must be some type of elf. That worried her, for elves can cause a good deal of damage if they're crossed. She was a very curious woman, though, a quality that had led to her marrying a giant and living in the plenty of his household. She wondered what these wee things might have to say for themselves and whether the bird was of the all-knowing sort that can see the future. "You may come in and take supper with me and my girls," she said, "but you must know that my husband is a giant, and if he catches you in his home, he'll likely crack your skulls and gobble your giblets."

The children sat down at the table with the woman and her daughters, three big, simple girls who gawped at them and sniggered. The woman served up boiled tongue of elk, boiled cabbages, and a bannock apiece. The girls could hardly believe their luck. The two eldest put their faces into the victuals and left Molly to answer the woman's questions about the lives of elves. "Do you have wee houses in the roots of the trees, then?" And, "Your bird there, does it speak?" To which Molly replied, "Yes, but palaces more like," and, "Yes, but only when it foretells a doom."

Just then came a ruckus at the door. The elk skin swept aside and the giant strode in with a blood-blotted sack upon his shoulder. He was a fearsome wight, with a beard like a badger's pelt and eyebrows like two weasels about to fight to the death. He stood three ells in height and weighed as much as an ox and a cart full of stones. "Good e'en, wife," said he, "and what are these withered skellingtons you've propped at my table?"

"It's elves," said the wife, "and they've come from their palaces."

"Have they now?" The giant threw the sack on the floor and came over to squint at the visitors. They stared back at him with eyes that glittered in shadowy sockets, skin stretched like drum-leather over their

bones. He was of a mind to catch them by the legs and bash their skulls against his hearthstone, but since they might be elves he was not sure of their powers. He decided it might be better to wait until they were asleep, when he could take them one by one. "Well then, you're right welcome," said he, "and do have some more cabbage."

He gave them strong mead to drink and took a great deal of it himself. When all were full and drowsy, he proposed that each of the sisters should sleep with one of his daughters so as to keep warm. Before they bedded down, the hospitable giant presented gifts to them all. To each of his daughters he gave a necklace strung with acorns, and to each of the visitors a necklace woven from grass, for that was how he planned to tell them apart in the dark.

When the fire was covered and all were nestled in the straw, Molly persuaded the giant's daughters to swap necklaces, for the acorns would knock together and keep the daughters awake, whereas the necklaces of grass were light and pleasant as moonlight.

At the darkest hour, the giant rose, took up his cudgel, and bashed the skulls of all those who wore the necklaces of grass, chuckling softly and thinking, "My girls will find themselves with a nice snack handy when they wake up in the morning."

Just at dawn, the magpie roused Molly and her sisters, who crept from those gruesome beds, slipped out the door, and made away as fast as their swollen bellies would allow. They ran along the edge of the gorge, but it was too wide to leap and too steep to climb down. They were still in sight of the giant's hut when he woke and discovered the carnage in his daughters' beds. He roared for revenge, snatched up his cudgel, and set out to destroy the three sisters, who crouched in terror on the edge of the precipice.

At this point, the clever magpie had to make a choice. She was coming to like this life of adventure, with its suppers of hedgehog and elk's tongue, and she reckoned that there might be more such viands in store if she threw in her lot with Molly Whuppy. First, though, she put the child to a test. Through she could have untied the hair that bound her to the girl's wrist, the bird scritchd and tugged at it to see if Molly would release her. This the girl did, figuring there was no point in all of them getting their skulls crushed first thing in the morning.

Once free, the bird made one end of the hair fast to a gnarled branch. She took the other in her beak, flew across the gorge, and tied it to a sturdy tree. She then jumped up and down on the hair to show that it was strong enough to hold the weight of three puny fugitives. The girls were unconvinced, but the giant was only a few strides away from taking his revenge. They balanced on the bridge of a single hair and teetered their way across the river.

The giant, in his rage, made as if to follow them, but as soon as he set his great foot upon the hair, he felt it wobble and looked down in terror at the snarling rocks below. He lurched back with a shudder and bawled out, "Woe betide thee, Molly Whuppy, if thou e'er returnst again!"

Molly and her sisters carried on their journey, down into the valley of the Hinge. Their bellies, withered by famine, ached terribly from so much food, but as their inner juices had begun to flow again, they were soon hungrier than ever. After some nights and days, they came to the castle of the local king. He was a powerful chieftain who controlled fully two-thirds of the valley and spent his springs and summers fighting to claim the rest of it.

This castle was a tower of stone with a palisade of logs. The king's two sons lorded it over his vassals, who swinked and sweated in the fields. The king himself was out in his castle yard cutting firewood, which he did to keep his axe arm in shape for the next season's wars. When he saw the three girls, he recognized that they were humans and not elves, and that, despite her bony look, the eldest was nearly nubile. It didn't take him long to discover that the two elder sisters hadn't much to boast of in the way of brains, but the youngest was a thing to be reckoned with. Upon her shoulder perched a regal bird that might well be the sort that can foretell the future.

"Girls, girls!" he said to them. "Welcome to my palace, and no doubt you'll want to freshen up a bit before supper." He pointed to the horse trough, where the young ladies doused themselves.

The supper convinced the magpie that she had made the right decision, for it consisted of a lovely haggis and all the boiled neeps the young guests could cram. As the mead horn went around, Molly recounted their adventure with the giant, with herself as the heroine. The king believed none of it, though he was careful not to let on. This giant was a

nuisance on his southern border, and one that he intended to deal with as soon as his other wars were won.

"It's easy to see you're the cunning one," he said to Molly, "and when you're ready to bleed and bear, I'd wed you to my eldest. Though I would, of course, require a small boon by way of dowry."

Molly had only to look across the hall to see the king's eldest son gulping mead to know that he'd be worthless as a husband. "What an honor *that* would be," she said, "but would it be proper to marry before my sisters? What boon would be required if my sister Murcha were to marry the crown prince?"

The king chuckled. "This giant you met with — he's said to wear a golden ring on the forefinger of his right hand. If you go back and collect that bauble for me, I'll be pleased to see your sister wedded and bedded with my boy."

Molly and the bird stayed another week and fattened themselves at the king's board, for she had no idea how she was going to steal the giant's ring. At last, though, they had to make at least a show of setting off on their quest.

When they came to the cliffs opposite the giant's hut, Molly hid in the woods while the magpie flew across to spy. The giant had somehow severed the bridge of a single hair, for he feared it might be used again. The bird perched in the thatch until she heard the giant and his wife sitting down to their supper. She then flew back to Molly and strung another hair across the gorge. When dusk came, the girl tiptoed over the bridge, trying hard not to look into the roaring darkness below. She slipped around to the back entrance of the giant's dwelling, but as she did so, she stumbled upon a midden where the creature and his wife threw the bones from their meals. Among the gnawed bones and skulls of animals were those of human kind, men, women, and children. Trembling, Molly slipped into the giant's hut through the back flap. As she crouched, she could see him at his supper, with the ring gleaming on his dirty finger. The girl crawled under the giant's bed and lay there until he and his wife should go to sleep.

When the giant rolled into bed, the bed-ropes creaked and the mat sagged so much that Molly had barely space enough to breathe. As the bed began to rumble with the giant's snores, she wriggled out from her hiding place. She pulled and twisted at the great ring, but it wouldn't budge. It

was only when she greased it with a fistful of fat from the giant's unwashed trencher that it slipped off. Molly found it was not a ring but a torque of twisted gold, big enough to go around her own scrawny neck. Its weight pressed upon her collarbones as she tiptoed out of the hut and headed for the gorge. The magpie had tied the new hair to a rough stone at the cliff's edge, and Molly saw that the stone was one of three, marking the graves of the daughters whose brains had been bashed out in their beds. The bird flew to and fro, urging Molly to go faster, but the girl was thrown off balance by the unfamiliar weight of the gold around her neck. She stumbled against the gravestone, producing a clang that echoed above the roar of the rapids.

The noise woke the giant in mid-snore. He sat up in the bed and felt for his ring, which he used to fondle and play with whenever he was fretful. He gave a mighty shout that blew his missus out of the other side of the bed and onto the hard-packed floor.

Molly scarcely had time to jump onto the bridge of a single hair. She reached the middle just as the great wight got to the cliff's edge. Having nearly plunged to his death the first time, the giant was not tempted to set foot on the bridge again. Instead he began hurling stones at the child as she balanced on the hair. Molly expected any second to be knocked into the chasm, but the stones clattered to one side or another as if they were fended away by an invisible shield. "Woe betide thee, Molly Whuppy," the giant roared, "if thou e'er returnst again!" The girl replied with a derisive finger gesture, for she had no intention of coming back to that dire place.

THE KING was out plowing with his war horses when he spied Molly and the bird emerging from the nearby forest. He was amazed to see the great gold torque about her neck and thought to himself that it became her well. "It's clear," he said, "you're not only a crafty wench but a lucky one, too. Your sister Murcha shall wed my son and become the crown princess of all my lands."

The marriage feasting was prodigious. Molly and her sisters gained enough flesh that they began to look like girls, though they remained short in stature. The king stayed quite drunk throughout the seven days of festivities, and when all was nearly done, he called Molly to his side. She

saw that he was wearing the giant's ring like a bracelet on his wrist. "I can see," he said, "that you're the best of the lot. When you're old enough to swive, I'd be happy to wed you to my second son."

Molly had only to look across the room at the second son, a fat lout who was so lazy he only rose from his bed to eat. "What an honor *that* would be," she said to the king, "but would it be proper to marry before my sister Sorcha? Perhaps she could be your second son's bride."

The king's bleary eyes brightened as though a bundle of rushes had been lit in his brain. "Fine idea!" he said. "There'd have to be a small boon, of course, as dowry." This time, it was the giant's finely strung harp that his late daughters used to plunk upon. It was said to hang from the rafters in the creature's hut.

When they had stalled as long as they decently could, Molly and the bird set out to try to rob the giant yet again. This exploit went much like the first. While the giant and his wife were at supper, Molly slipped in and scuttled under the bed. It was far more difficult this time, for Molly had fattened to the point that she was almost as big around as a normal girl. She hid under the wife's side in hope that the wife's weight wouldn't cause the bed to sag so much. Even so, when the giant crawled in, the mat pressed on Molly like a stone coffin lid. Worse, the giant and his wife began attending to matrimonial affairs, and by the time they were done, Molly felt herself pummeled nearly to death.

The magpie had been lurking outside, and when she heard the snoring of the giant and his wife, she slipped under the elk-hide door. There was the well-strung harp, hanging from the rafter as if it were waiting for an angel to descend and play for the Second Coming. The bird lifted the instrument from its hook and dropped it to Molly who was standing below.

As ill luck would have it, Molly staggered a bit with the weight of the harp, and she bumped against the giant's bedpost. The giant was wide-eyed and out of bed just as the two burglars darted under the elk-skin curtain. As they ran, Molly's arm brushed against the harp strings, producing a beautiful chord. At each sound of the strings, the giant slowed a little more, as if he might fall asleep in mid-stride, while Molly scampered across the near-invisible bridge. The giant wavered on the cliff's edge, so tired that his threat of, "Woe betide thee!" was scarcely more than a yawn.

The king was out sharpening his boar spears when Molly and the bird arrived with the harp. He smiled dreamily when she stroked the strings and produced a sound as delicate as the dropping of rose petals into a bowl of porridge. The king kept his word and wed his son Prince Niall to Molly's sister Sorcha. The celebration was near as rich as that for the crown prince and his bride.

After six days of heavy drinking, the king began to have new ideas about the royal line of succession. He summoned Molly and spoke to her thus: "Sharp as you are, my dear, I'm sure you've noticed there's no longer any queen to companion me during the golden years of my reign." Molly had noticed that, and she'd also heard the rumors that the late queen had perished during some rough admonishment from her husband, who was upset about the poor quality of her offspring. "You're such a likely lass," the king leered, "that you'd make a fine young queen for this empire I'm building. As soon as you're fit to bear my weight, I'll wed you myself."

For once, Molly had a hard time hiding her distaste for the king's plan. "What an honor *that* would be," she said, even as her head was whirling with excuses not to go through with it. "Would there be the usual boon by way of a dowry?"

"Well, yes," said the king. "I'd like nothing better than to drop the requirement, but that's the way things have always been done around here, and my people would accept nothing less." He explained that the giant was said to have a great two-handed sword hanging from his bedpost. Molly had, in fact, seen this weapon during her previous visits.

This time, Molly and the bird tarried even longer at the king's court, though the thought of confronting the giant one more time had nearly destroyed their appetites for the monarch's food and drink. At length, though, they had to go, slowly and morosely, on a quest that each of them knew was little better than self-murder.

Their expedition went much as it had the time before. Molly squeezed herself under the giant's bed. Although the girl was still quite thin by human standards, it was very tight quarters. She had a hard time getting underneath, even before the giant rolled his great bulk into the bed. When the creature finally reclined, he was heavy as a mound of graveyard clay

upon Molly's breast. She couldn't move until the early hours of the morning, when the giant got up to relieve himself in the backyard.

Molly slipped out and grasped the blade that was hanging from the giant's bedpost. In truth, it was only the creature's dagger, but its pommel came up to the child's waist. She could barely drag it out the front door and across the yard before the giant came raging after her with his cudgel in his hand. "Woe's upon thee, Molly Whuppy," he cried, "for thou wert fool enough to return to me again!"

Molly scuttled as fast as ever she might, but she refused to let go of the blade, which dragged behind her, plowing a furrow all the way to the cliff's edge. The giant caught up to her in just a couple of strides and snatched at her coppery curls. He grabbed a fistful, which straightened to nearly their full length, but that was enough to yank the child to a halt. She fell backward, still clutching the dagger, as the giant reeled her in like a thrashing trout.

With a scritch of rage, the magpie flung herself into the giant's face, clawing at his eye. He skelped her aside as if she were no more than a biting fly and she tumbled to the ground in a muddle of feathers. Molly scrambled to her knees, tightened her grip on the dagger, and twisted about to bring her hair against its gleaming edge. The tresses strained for a second, resisting. Then the hairs parted with a sound like chimes and Molly rolled free. Dagger in hands, she sprang onto the bridge of a single hair.

In his anger, the giant forgot his fear and leapt after her. He got midway across the gorge before he remembered his predicament and froze. Molly fairly tripped across to the opposite crag and turned, the dagger poised above the taut hair wavering beneath the giant's feet. "Woe's upon *you*, Gnawer-of-Men," she said, "for if nothing else can cut my hair, I know this blade can."

"Sparest thou me!" the giant cried. "Thou'st robbed me of everything — my girls, my treasures of power! Thou knowest not, even, what thou hast!"

Molly considered. The bridge of a single hair thrummed with the giant's trembling. "Tell me then what I have stolen from you and given to the king of Hinge."

"My ring," the giant said, "that protects against any hurt. My harp,

that brings sleep to the guiltiest heart, and my dagger, that cuts through the toughest bond, even thy hair."

Molly reached up and touched the ragged edges of her cropped hair. She thought, not about the giant, but about the king, to whom she had unwittingly given so much power. She hefted the gleaming edge of the blade away from the bridge but kept its point aimed at the giant. "Go back then, if you can."

The hulking figure turned, balancing precariously upon the hair. He scarcely saw the magpie as she hurtled into his face, claws shredding at his eye. He was already past the tipping point when he raised his arm to swat at her, already head down into the abyss, where the roar of the water drowned the thunder of his fall.

The magpie circled thrice and perched upon the bridge of a single hair, which swayed as she preened and ruffled her feathers back into place. She showed no more regret over the giant's death than if he had been an owl.

Before they left that place, Molly asked the bird to fly back across the gorge and untie the bridge of a single hair, so they could coil it and carry it with them, for the child hardly knew whether she'd ever be able to grow such a hair again.

THE RUSH LIGHTS were lit and the king was already well into his second bowl of mead when Molly and the bird returned. "You are shorn," he said, thick-tongued, "and I see no sword. Has the giant bested you, then?"

"He caught me by the hair," she said. "We nearly perished, the bird and me."

"Well, you came away empty-handed," the king said, "but I'm sure you'll make it up to me somehow." He drank again and slouched back in the great chair he called his throne. Molly saw that the golden torque circled his wrist and the harp gleamed by the mead bowl. The bird hopped off her shoulder and hobbled across the table, for she was still bruised by the swat of the giant.

"You may be surprised to know," said Molly, "that this bird is of the all-knowing sort that can foretell the future."

"I thought as much," said the king. "Didn't think a wee girl could be

so clever on her own." The magpie drew herself up, her eyes glittering like jet. She began to speak in a voice that rasped and rattled like bones in a box. At first the sounds made no sense, though they rose and fell with the cadences of human speech. The king began to discern phrases, such as "woe betide thee" and "gobble your giblets." At the end of each pronouncement, the bird stretched her neck and stroked the strings of the harp with her gleaming beak.

"She says you shall be successful in your wars," Molly said. The harp sounded again and the king gave a drowsy smirk. "You shall rule over all the valley of the Hinge." Again, the ripple of the strings. The magpie's predictions droned on. "She says you shall be lucky in your last queen, and properly grateful for her counsel." The bird's voice stopped, and her beak struck a chiming chord. The king's head drooped.

When he awoke, it was well past dawn. The king's head hurt, and his buttocks ached from the hard chair. Before him sat Molly, with the golden torque about her neck and the harp at her side. The magpie stood beside the instrument, with her beak just touching the strings. At Molly's other side was the giant's dagger. "What foolishness is this?" the king cried, lunging from his chair. He got only about an ell before his ankle jerked and he fell to the floor. A coppery hair held him fast to the oaken throne.

"You'll find there's only enough length to reach the chamber pot," Molly said, "but if you're good, we'll let it out, an ell at a time, until you can walk about the chamber. If you're very good, you'll find that all the bird's foretelling will come true. You will make me your queen, now and to rule after you when you're gone. You will never touch me, but if you heed my words, you may have the name and honors of a king and go freely about your business. Understood?"

The king did not understand, then or for many days afterward, but the power of the giant's treasures must have brought him to reason at last, for the chronicles tell of a red-haired queen called *Maol a Chliobain*, who ruled in Hinge for many decades, before the days of Arthur. †