

The Ash and The Elm

Written By

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SCRIPTFEST DRAFT

IONA (F,26)
ESSIE (F,29)
MAGGIE (F,10)
PREIST (M,40)
MRS REID (F,30)
HAMISH (M,9)
SMALL BOY + INJURED CHILD(M,9)
CHILD 1 (M,11)
CHILD 2 (F,10)
CHILD 3 (F,9)

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EXT. WOODS - DUSK (MAY 1939)

IONA clutches a baby wrapped tightly in blankets. She is walking quickly, purposefully, through dense Scottish woodland. The sun is setting, casting a red glow through the trees, and creating shadow hands that pass over her face. Although we struggle to see her clearly, Iona is young, in her 20s, focused. Over this we hear a voice over, slightly out of breath and spoken as if telling a child a fairy-tale;

IONA (V.O)

Once upon a time, on an evening that felt like the last night on earth. The world, not for the first time, grew restless and its men went to war.

The baby, now screaming, it's red, blotchy face scrunched up as it bawls. Iona extends her arms, as if offering the baby to someone. It screams louder and louder.

IONA (V.O)

As the men set out to destroy one another, a beautiful wee princess, born to the wrong mother, also grew restless. She outgrew the disgusting world that only brought death and destruction. The princess grew until she could reach the tops of the trees, until she could outrun the disgusting men that hurt and killed. She ran until she felt the healing hand of the forest and she fell upon them, to live in peace. The wee princess outgrew all illness, all war and all death. She lived out there, holding hands with the trees, forever.

The baby hangs on extended arms for what seems like eternity, until finally, a hand extends a long finger to stroke gently the chubby fist of the baby. Human in movement but inhuman in appearance, the hand is made up of long twigs which intertwine and knot, creating a hand treelike but so real. The baby continues to scream.

CUT TO:

INT. EVACUEE BUS - LATE AFTERNOON (OCTOBER 1939)

A baby cries and fusses on the knee of YOUNG BOY, no older than 10. Another, YOUNGER BOY, sits next to them. On his knee is a suitcase and a gas mask. Around them a hushed gaggle of children sway too and fro as the bus navigates the hilly Scottish Highlands.

The bus drives steadily between steep hills and dense forest.

On the same bus, Iona, suitcase at her feet, reads a book, pausing occasionally to scribble notes in the margin or underline a specific sentence.

On the bus, there are several women, some pregnant, some teachers, some volunteers and carers. Mostly the bus consists of evacuee children, travelling from Edinburgh, separated from family and escaping from the war to the safety of the rural Highlands.

Iona removes her eyes from the book and looks around at the tired and scared children. She fixes on the woman sitting across the aisle, her pregnant belly protruding, as if she is very close to labour. Peeling her eyes away, Iona looks out of the window, distracted.

EXT. HIGHLAND VILLAGE - EARLY EVENING

The bus pulls up to a village; they have arrived. Like the other passengers, Iona gathers her meagre belongings and disembarks.

The evacuees are greeted by forlorn faces of the locals. Shepherded by a billet officer and some of the women, they are allocated places to stay and people to stay with.

In a bid to remove herself from the stress of the evacuation and the increasing wails of children calling out for fathers and mothers. Iona walks the main street of the well established village.

Iona takes in the church and the graveyard that guards it.

She notices the small school and modest patches of farmland.

But mostly she observes the great, green and orange forest that encompasses and intertwines itself with the village.

EXT. HIGHLAND WOODS - EARLY EVENING

Iona walks forward through the trees that surround the

village, inhaling the clean air in an attempt to rid herself of the stress of the journey.

SMALL BOY

Miss, I'm scared

Startled by the child, Iona realises she has been followed. Several children stand, hanging back from the stranger, but close enough that they feel safer. The trees tower over them.

Iona observes the tired children staring into the increasingly dark, dense woods. She makes no attempt to go to them.

Finally she replies.

IONA

There's no need to be scared. You should be more scared out there

than in the woods..

She indicates to the village

IONA (CONT'D)

Amongst the trees, we are safe, we are watched over, by beings that have lived thousands and thousands of years, they know how to care and nurture, you cannot be safer than here.

You know, once upon a time, there was a group of little princes and princesses, just like you, who were scared of the woods. Just like you...

CUT TO.

INT. SMALL VILLAGE HOUSE - EVENING

Iona is now sitting in a small dining area. Connected to a kitchen and living room. At the dining table she tears pieces of bread and dunks them into a bowl of thick broth. Opposite her, sits a young girl of about ten, Margaret or MAGGIE for short, who watches Iona intently. We join the pair mid-meal, and what seems to be mid-story.

IONA

...and that's why the princes and princesses flourished, because they ran amongst the trees and never, ever looked back.

ESSIE (O.S)

Maggie! Maggie, bed c'mon

MAGGIE

(To Iona)

But what about the princesses Ma's and Pa's? They must've been..

IONA

They knew their wee-uns were better off, for they didn't know how to look after themselves, never mind children.

ESSIE, a woman just slightly older than Iona but plenty more tired, walks into the dining area from the bedroom that Maggie shares with her baby brother, DOUGIE. Essie grabs Maggie by the arm and drags her away from Iona, into her bedroom. The child's protests can be heard as, in hushed tones, her mother commands her to get changed.

ESSIE (O.S)

Margaret, please. Your brother has a fever coming on. Don't wake him. We want- we need him to get better, don't we?

There's no reply but no more noise comes from the bedroom. Iona, stands and walks the small but homely rooms. Noticing 2 framed photos on the mantelpiece; one of Essie, her Husband and a much younger Maggie. The other Iona picks up. It frames a baby, swaddled in cloth. She stares at the photo for a second, before catching herself and quickly replacing it.

She steadily observes the rest of the room. Around a fireplace sit two armchairs, worn but comfortable. A circular wooden dining table and chairs. Noticing her empty dinner plates Iona takes them into the kitchen.

The kitchen is simple and standard for its time. Potted herbs and spices line the window ledge, a couple of repurposed jam jars now contain herbal remedies and concoctions.

Iona gently cleans her soup bowl and plate at the sink, facing the window and staring out into the night. Tree branches tap tap on the glass, powered by the highland winds and creating a beat for the rhythmic cleaning of the dishes.

ESSIE

Iona... your... so your husband, where is he stationed?

Iona looks round at her host standing in the doorway. She then returns her gaze to the outside.

IONA

I don't have a husband.
I don't have a husband and I don't have children.

ESSIE

But, you're a teacher...

IONA

I can teach a child but I cannot raise a child.

ESSIE

I'm sure that's not true, if I can do it, anybody can.

(pause)

Well... as much as it must be awful to be evacuated from your home, we appreciate the extra pair of hands, especially with Mrs Reid so close to having her bairn.

Iona smiles at Essie, a smile as if she doesn't want to reply but doesn't want to seem rude. Iona once again looks outside into the dark woods. She contemplates as the moonlight hits the trees.

INT. VILLAGE CHURCH - MORNING

The next morning, Iona stands at the front of a small village church. Beautiful, medieval stained glass windows surround her. Facing Iona are several pews full of anxious children, readily awaiting some sort of interaction. Some are already bored with school, sitting on the hard pews in a cold church. They range from about 5 to 10 years old. An even mix of local village kids, including Maggie, and evacuee children, who are clothed in mismatched attire, after dressing themselves for

the first time. Iona's eyes shift from face to face, when suddenly the church doors open. A pregnant woman, MRS REID we may presume, drags in a blackboard on wheels.

IONA

Oh grand, thank you.

The teacher presses chalk and a register of the children's names into Iona's hand.

TEACHER

Alright love.

The teacher offers a small smile to the group of children. With a quick wave to Maggie, she hurries down the aisle, the doors exclaiming her exit with a slam.

Iona watches after her, she turns to the board with hesitation, and promptly writes her name; 'Miss Mackie.' She looks down at the list of children and back up at their expectant faces. After a moment her eyes wander up to the stained glass window.

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. CHURCH CONFESSION BOOTH - MORNING (MARCH 1939)

The sunlight, falling through the stained glass window, projects a rainbow onto Iona's shoes. She is seated in a confession booth, hands clasped across her stomach. She is 7 months into pregnancy. She looks down at her hands. The silhouette of a priest can be seen through the grate.

IONA

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.

EXT. WOODS - MORNING

Over the following shots, we hear a V.O. from the FLASHBACK in the confession booth.

IONA (V.O)

I am with child but I am unmarried.
I...I am not ready to raise this
child, Father, nor do I believe the
world is ready.

(PAUSE)

I am sorry for these sins and the sins
of my past life

Iona leads the children into the woodland surrounding the village. The children, happier now, swing their gas masks beside them as they follow their teacher through the trees. Their small hands stroke the trunks upon passing, grabbing at leaves and kicking stones.

PRIEST (V.O)

As you know, sex belongs only in the sanctuary of a marriage covenant between one man and one woman. But no one should feel that, because a child originated in a sinful act, God cannot make this child great. He can.

IONA (V.O)

How will he make her great Father?

Iona stops at a tree, runs her hand up the trunk and looks up at its leafy canopy. The children also touch the tree, some giggling, feeling silly. Others, more seriously staring intently up at the tree.

IONA

Children, this is an Elm tree. When the time is right, between the roots

The children look down at the roots between their feet.

IONA(CONT'D)

The ground opens, and the underworld gapes, ready, waiting. Sometimes, creatures crawl out. Elves. But only in order to rid the earth of it's sins. And the sinners.

Isn't that incredible?

Iona smiles, glancing back at the village.

IONA

Come on children

She walks them deeper into the woods, talking to them as she walks.