

Once there was a cup.

But it was not an ordinary cup, for it was a silver cup with an oak sleeve turned in the shape of an acorn, one hand high, as if it had been crafted for a child.

And on a winter day in Dolgellau, a small town in northwest Wales, it was Cadi who found the cup, lodged between a stone wall and her grandmother's oak coffer.

Cadi pulled the cup until she heard a quiet "pop" muffled by the coffer's cobwebs. A tiny split opened in the wood, smaller than the breath of a bee.

"Oh," Cadi whispered, fearing what her grandmother would say. Cradling the cup, she examined the two silver discs attached to the wooden sleeve. One had an engraving of an oak tree above the words *Ceubren yr Ellyll*, and 1813. The other was engraved with a coat of arms and *ASGRE LÂN DIOGEL EI PHERCHEN*.

It was so lovely, and so unknown, Cadi thought she might cry. Although she had never seen the cup, or heard talk of it, it was beautiful and important-looking. And the tiny crack grew heavy in her mind.

"Cadi!" her grandmother called. "Your father's here!"

Cadi panicked, opened her backpack and stuffed the acorn cup inside.



... ac Techyd, i fymryn o'n Ddar
... a dod i'n Brenhin, ac er Llio y...

Caebrwyn yr Elyll
1813.



As she and her dad walked home, hand in hand, the wind picked up and the tree branches clattered. The wind quickened more and tossed a large oak leaf into Cadi's face. She startled, and brushed it away. Another landed on her backpack and, unbeknownst to her, got stuck.

Once home Cadi did her chores, sweeping up shavings in her father's woodshop, a small outbuilding just steps behind the house. Her dad built stick chairs with seats that gently dipped and rose and dipped again, with arms that wrapped around you, as if the chair was on the verge of giving you a *cwtsh*, a hug.

Her sweeping finished, Cadi picked up her backpack and noticed the oak leaf, its stem caught in the pull of the zipper. She plucked the leaf free and walked outside. Cadi tossed it in the air. It danced, up and down and around and around. A slight change in temperature made her shiver. She turned and walked to her house, the wind gently pushing the leaf behind her.





“Tell me a Mabinogion story,” Cadi said, as her mother tucked her into bed.

Cadi loved “The Mabinogion,” old Welsh stories of quests and adventure. There were dragons and giants, King Arthur and his court, tragic stories, funny stories, stories with magic, and, sometimes, death and kissing.

Her mother said the stories were first told hundreds of years ago by *cyfarwyddiaid*, storytellers. In Cadi’s family, these stories had been kept alive by the mothers.

The stories were in books, of course, but Cadi liked it best when her mum shared the stories from memory, out loud. They were as familiar as her quilt, but different with each telling, in small ways she couldn’t quite say.



On this night, Cadi's mother chose to tell her version of "The Tale of Lludd and Llefelys." Llefelys, king of France, was brother to Lludd, king of Britain. In the story Lludd's kingdom was beset with three *gormesoedd*, plagues. The first plague was the arrival of the *Coraniaid*, beings that Cadi imagined as dwarves, who could hear anything the wind met, no matter how quietly spoken. This, of course, was of great help to their evil ways.

The second plague was a shriek that came on every May Eve. Cadi's mum often quoted these lines from a book that they owned, because she liked them - "And this went through people's hearts, and so scared them, that the men lost their hue and their strength, and the women their children, and the young men and the maidens lost their senses, and all the animals and trees and the earth and the waters, were left barren."

The third plague was a mysterious disappearance of food and provisions in King Lludd's court.

It was late, so Cadi knew her mum had chosen this story because it was short. But still, it was one of Cadi's favorites. She listened as her mum described how Llefelys helped Lludd end the plagues, first with a potion made from crushed insects. She laughed when her mum then mimicked fighting dragons who later fell asleep, drunk on mead. And near the end of the story, when Cadi tried to picture a "mighty man of magic," she imagined a tall, tall wizard with a pointy hat.







That night Cadi couldn't sleep. At first all she could think about was the story. And then all she could think about was the acorn cup – the broken acorn cup. She got out of bed, padded softly across her room and lifted the cup out of her backpack. She held it, and saw an inscription she hadn't noticed before:

Lle gwreiddio y Fesen, Llwydded y Dderwen.

From school, Cadi knew *lle* meant “where.” *Y Dderwen*, she remembered, meant “the oak.” The other words were mysteries.

Cadi held the cup and thought about the elegant and curvy inscription, the cup's funny acorn shape and the fancy people who drank from it long ago. But mostly she thought about how mad her grandmother was going to be.

It's such a small crack, she thought. She squinted, wishing it smaller. And then she thought about her grandmother's old eyes. Maybe she wouldn't see the crack, Cadi thought. And maybe, if the cup could still hold water, her grandmother would never even know about it.

Cadi crept into the kitchen, climbed a stool in front of the sink and filled the cup with water. Nothing happened. She waited for it to leak, worried her parents would discover her. But still, the wooden sleeve was dry. This comforted her. And then, without thinking, Cadi brought the cup's silver rim to her lips. What she didn't know was that buried deep in the cup's oak sleeve were spirits' stories, long-forgotten tales of hobgoblins and demons and death and sorrow, of things passed down and whispered in the dark, to scare and to warn. The bee's-breath crack had awakened them, and with one small sip of water, Cadi drank them all in.