The April Witch, Ray Bradbury

The April Witch

Into the air, over the valleys, under the stars, above a river, a pond, a road, flew Cecy.

Invisible as new spring winds, fresh as the breath of clover rising from twilight fields, she flew.

She soared in doves as soft as white ermine, stopped in trees and lived in blossoms, showering away in petals when the breeze blew.

She perched in a lime-green frog, cool as mint by a shining pool. She trotted in a brambly dog and barked to hear echoes from the sides of distant barns. She lived in new April grasses, in sweet clear liquids rising from the musky earth.

It's spring, thought Cecy. I'll be in every living thing in the world tonight.

Now she inhabited neat crickets on the tar-pool roads, now prickled in dew on an iron gate. Hers was an adaptably quick mind flowing unseen upon Illinois winds on this one evening of her life when she was just seventeen.

'I want to be in love,' she said.

She had said it at supper. And her parents had widened their eyes and stiffened back in their chairs. 'Patience,' had been their advice. 'Remember, you're remarkable. Our whole Family is odd and remarkable. We can't mix or marry with ordinary folk. We'd lose our magical powers if we did. You wouldn't want to lose your ability to "travel" by magic, would you? Then be careful. Be careful!'

But in her high bedroom, Cecy had touched perfume to her throat and stretched out, trembling and apprehensive, on her four-poster, as a

moon the color of milk rose over Illinois country, turning rivers to cream and roads to platinum.

‘Yes,’ she sighed. ‘I’m one of an odd family. We sleep days and fly nights like black kites on the wind. If we want, we can sleep in moles through the winter, in the warm earth. I can live in anything at all—a pebble, a crocus, or a praying mantis. I can leave my plain, bony body behind and send my mind far out for adventure. Now!’

The wind whipped her away over fields and meadows.
She saw the warm spring lights of cottages and farms glowing with twilight colors.

If I can’t be in love, myself, because I’m plain and odd, then I’ll be in love through someone else, she thought.
Outside a farmhouse in the spring night a dark-haired girl, no more than nineteen, drew up water from a deep stone well. She was singing.

Cecy fell—a green leaf—into the well. She lay in the tender moss of the well, gazing up through dark coolness. Now she quickened in a fluttering invisible amoeba. Now in a water droplet! At last, within a cold cup, she felt herself lifted to the girl’s warm lips. There was a soft night sound of drinking.

Cecy looked out from the girl’s eyes.

She entered into the dark head and gazed from the shining eyes at the hands pulling the rough rope. She listened through the shell ears to this girl’s world. She smelled a particular universe through these delicate nostrils, felt this special heart beating, beating. Felt this strange tongue move with singing.

Does she know I’m here? thought Cecy.
The girl gasped. She stared into the night meadows.

‘Who’s there?’
No answer.

‘Only the wind,’ whispered Cecy.
‘Only the wind.’ The girl laughed at herself, but shivered.

It was a good body, this girl’s body. It held bones of finest slender ivory hidden and roundly fleshed. This brain was like a pink tea rose, hung in darkness, and there was cider-wine in this mouth.

The lips lay firm on the white, white teeth and the brows arched neatly at the world, and the hair blew soft and fine on her milky neck. The pores knit small and close. The nose tilted at the moon and the cheeks glowed like small fires.

The body drifted with feather-balances from one motion to another and seemed always singing to itself. Being in this body, this head, was like basking in a hearth fire, living in the purr of a sleeping cat, stirring in warm creek waters that flowed by night to the sea.

I’ll like it here, thought Cecy.
‘What?’ asked the girl, as if she’d heard a voice.
‘What’s your name?’ asked Cecy carefully.

‘Ann Leary.’ The girl twitched. ‘Now why should I say that out loud?’
‘Ann, Ann,’ whispered Cecy. ‘Ann, you’re going to be in love.’

As if to answer this, a great roar sprang from the road, a clatter and a ring of wheels on gravel. A tall man drove up in a rig, holding the reins high with his monstrous arms, his smile glowing across the yard.

‘Ann!’
‘Is that you, Tom?’
‘Who else?’ Leaping from the rig, he tied the reins to the fence.
‘I’m not speaking to you!’ Ann whirled, the bucket in her hands slopping.

‘No!’ cried Cecy.
Ann froze. She looked at the hills and the first spring stars. She stared at the man named Tom. Cecy made her drop the bucket.

‘Look what you’ve done!’
Tom ran up.
‘Look what you made me do!’
He wiped her shoes with a kerchief, laughing.

‘Get away!’ She kicked at his hands, but he laughed again, and gazing down on him from miles away, Cecy saw the turn of his head, the size of his skull, the flare of his nose, the shine of his eye, the girth of his shoulder, and the hard strength of his hands doing this delicate thing with the handkerchief. Peering down from the secret attic of this lovely head, Cecy yanked a hidden copper ventriloquist’s wire and the pretty mouth popped wide: ‘Thank you!’

‘Oh, so you have manners?’ The smell of leather on his hands, the smell of the horse rose from his clothes into the tender nostrils, and Cecy, far, far away over night meadows and flowered fields, stirred as with some dream in her bed.

‘Not for you, no!’ said Ann.
‘Hush, speak gently,’ said Cecy. She moved Ann’s fingers out toward Tom’s head. Ann snatched them back.

‘I’ve gone mad!’
‘You have.’ He nodded, smiling but bewildered. ‘Were you going to touch me then?’

‘I don’t know. Oh, go away!’ Her cheeks glowed with pink charcoals.
‘Why don’t you run? I’m not stopping you.’ Tom got up. ‘Have you changed your mind? Will you go to the dance with me tonight? It’s special. Tell you why later.’

‘No,’ said Ann.

‘Yes!’ cried Cecy. ‘I’ve never danced. I want to dance. I’ve never worn a long gown, all rustly. I want that. I want to dance all night. I’ve never

known what it's like to be in a woman, dancing: Father and Mother would never permit it.

Dogs, cats, locusts, leaves, everything else in the world at one time or another I've known, but never a woman in the spring, never on a night like this, Oh, please—we must go to that dance!'

She spread her thought like the fingers of a hand within a new glove.

'Yes,' said Ann Leary, 'I'll go. I don't know why, but I'll go to the dance with you tonight, Tom.'
'Now inside, quick!' cried Cecy. 'You must wash, tell your folks, get your gown ready, out with the iron, into your room!'

'Mother,' said Ann, 'I've changed my mind!'

The rig was galloping off down the pike, the rooms of the farmhouse jumped to life, water was boiling for a bath, the coal stove was heating an iron to press the gown, the mother was rushing about with a fringe of hairpins in her mouth. 'What's come over you, Ann? You don't like Tom!'

'That's true.' Ann stopped amidst the great fever.
But it's spring! thought Cecy.

'It's spring,' said Ann.
And it's a fine night for dancing, thought Cecy.

'…for dancing,' murmured Ann Leary.

Then she was in the tub and the soap creaming on her white seal shoulders, small nests of soap beneath her arms, and the flesh of her warm breasts moving in her hands and Cecy moving the mouth, making the smile, keeping the actions going. There must be no pause, no hesitation, or the entire pantomime might fall in ruins! Ann Leary must be kept moving, doing, acting, wash here, soap there, now out! Rub with a towel! Now perfume and powder!

‘You!’ Ann caught herself in the mirror, all whiteness and pinkness like lilies and carnations. ‘Who are you tonight?’

‘I’m a girl seventeen.’ Cecy gazed from her violet eyes. ‘You can’t see me. Do you know I’m here?’
Ann Leary shook her head. ‘I’ve rented my body to an April witch, for sure.’
‘Close, very close!’ laughed Cecy. ‘Now, on with your dressing.’

The luxury of feeling good clothes move over an ample body! And then the halloo outside.

‘Ann, Tom’s back!’
‘Tell him to wait.’ Ann sat down suddenly. ‘Tell him I’m not going to that dance.’

‘What?’ said her mother, in the door.

Cecy snapped back into attention. It had been a fatal relaxing, a fatal moment of leaving Ann’s body for only an instant. She had heard the distant sound of horses’ hoofs and the rig rambling through moonlit spring country. For a second she thought, I’ll go find Tom and sit in his head and see what it’s like to be in a man of twenty-two on a night like this. And so she had started quickly across a heather field, but now, like a bird to a cage, flew back and rustled and beat about in Ann Leary’s head.

‘Ann!’
‘Tell him to go away!’
‘Ann!’ Cecy settled down and spread her thoughts.
But Ann had the bit in her mouth now. ‘No, no, I hate him!’

I shouldn’t have left—even for a moment. Cecy poured her mind into the hands of the young girl, into the heart, into the head, softly, softly. Stand up, she thought.

Ann stood.
Put on your coat!
Ann put on her coat.
Now, march!

No! thought Ann Leary.
March!

‘Ann,’ said her mother, ‘don’t keep Tom waiting another minute. You get on out there now and no nonsense. What’s come over you?’

‘Nothing, Mother. Good night. We’ll be home late.’
Ann and Cecy ran together into the spring evening.

A room full of softly dancing pigeons ruffling their quiet, trailing feathers, a room full of peacocks, a room full of rainbow eyes and lights. And in the center of it, around, around, around, danced Ann Leary.

‘Oh, it is a fine evening,’ said Cecy.
‘Oh, it’s a fine evening,’ said Ann.
‘You’re odd,’ said Tom.

The music whirled them in dimness, in rivers of song: they floated, they bobbed, they sank down, they arose for air, they gasped, they clutched each other like drowning people and whirled on again, in fan motions, in whispers and sighs, to ‘Beautiful Ohio.’

Cecy hummed. Ann’s lips parted and the music came out.
‘Yes, I’m odd,’ said Cecy.
‘You’re not the same,’ said Tom.

‘No, not tonight.’
‘You’re not the Ann Leary I knew.’

‘No, not at all, at all,’ whispered Cecy, miles and miles away. ‘No, not at all,’ said the moved lips.

‘I’ve the funniest feeling,’ said Tom.
‘About what?’

‘About you.’ He held her back and danced her and looked into her glowing face, watching for something. ‘Your eyes,’ he said. ‘I can’t figure it.’

‘Do you see me?’ asked Cecy.
‘Part of you’s here, Ann, and part of you’s not.’ Tom turned her carefully, his face uneasy.
‘Yes.’

‘Why did you come with me?’
‘I didn’t want to come,’ said Ann.
‘Why, then?’
‘Something made me.’
‘What?’

‘I don’t know,’ Ann’s voice was faintly hysterical.
‘Now, now, hush, hush,’ whispered Cecy. ‘Hush, that’s it. Around, around.’

They whispered and rustled and rose and fell away in the dark room, with the music moving and turning them.

‘But you did come to the dance,’ said Tom.
‘I did,’ said Cecy.
‘Here,’ And he danced her lightly out an open door and walked her quietly away from the hall and the music and the people.

They climbed up and sat together in the rig.
‘Ann,’ he said, taking her hands, trembling. ‘Ann.’ But the way he said her name it was as if it wasn’t her name. He kept glancing into her pale face, and now her eyes were open again. ‘I used to love you, you know that,’ he said.

‘I know.’

‘But you’ve always been fickle and I didn’t want to be hurt.’

‘It’s just as well, we’re very young,’ said Ann.
‘No, I mean to say, I’m sorry,’ said Cecy.
‘What do you mean?’ Tom dropped her hands and stiffened.

The night was warm and the smell of the earth shimmered up all about them where they sat, and the fresh trees breathed one leaf against another in a shaking and rustling.
‘I don’t know,’ said Ann.

‘Oh, but I know,’ said Cecy. ‘You’re tall and you’re the finest-looking man in all the world. This is a good evening; this is an evening I’ll always remember, being with you.’ She put out the alien cold hand to find his reluctant hand again and bring it back, and warm it and hold it very tight.

‘But,’ said Tom, blinking, ‘tonight you’re here, you’re there. One minute one way, the next minute another. I wanted to take you to the dance tonight for old times’ sake, I meant nothing by it when I first asked you.

And then, when we were standing at the well, I knew something had changed, really changed, about you. You were different. There was something new and soft, something…’ He groped for a word. ‘I don’t know, I can’t say. The way you looked. Something about your voice. And I know I’m in love with you again.’

‘No,’ said Cecy. ‘With me, with me.’
‘And I’m afraid of being in love with you,’ he said. ‘You’ll hurt me again.’
‘I might,’ said Ann.

No, no, I’d love you with all my heart! thought Cecy. Ann, say it to him, say it for me. Say you’d love him with all your heart.
Ann said nothing.

Tom moved quietly closer and put his hand up to hold her chin. ‘I’m going away. I’ve got a job a hundred miles from here. Will you miss me?’
‘Yes,’ said Ann and Cecy.

‘May I kiss you good-by, then?’
‘Yes,’ said Cecy before anyone else could speak.
He placed his lips to the strange mouth. He kissed the strange mouth and he was trembling.

Ann sat like a white statue.
‘Ann!’ said Cecy. ‘Move your arms, hold him!’
She sat like a carved wooden doll in the moonlight.

Again he kissed her lips.
‘I do love you,’ whispered Cecy. ‘I’m here, it’s me you saw in her eyes, it’s me, and I love you if she never will.’
He moved away and seemed like a man who had run a long distance. He sat beside her. ‘I don’t know what’s happening. For a moment there…’

‘Yes?’ asked Cecy.
‘For a moment I thought—’ He put his hands to his eyes. ‘Never mind. Shall I take you home now?’

‘Please,’ said Ann Leary.

He clucked to the horse, snapped the reins tiredly, and drove the rig away. They rode in the rustle and slap and motion of the moonlit rig in the still early, only eleven o’clock spring night, with the shining meadows and sweet fields of clover gliding by.

And Cecy, looking at the fields and meadows, thought, It would be worth it, it would be worth everything to be with him from this night on. And she heard her parents’ voices again, faintly, ‘Be careful. You wouldn’t want to lose your magical powers, would you—married to a mere mortal? Be careful. You wouldn’t want that.’

Yes, yes, thought Cecy, even that I'd give up, here and now, if he would have me. I wouldn't need to roam the spring nights then, I wouldn't need to live in birds and dogs and cats and foxes, I'd need only to be with him. Only him. Only him.

The road passed under, whispering.
'Tom,' said Ann at last.
'What?' He stared coldly at the road, the horse, the trees, the sky, the stars.

'If you're ever, in years to come, at any time, in Mellin Town, Illinois, a few miles from here, will you do me a favor?'
'Perhaps.'

'Will you do me the favor of stopping and seeing a friend of mine?' Ann Leary said this haltingly, awkwardly.
'Why?'

'She's a good friend. I've told her of you. I'll give you her address. Just a moment.' When the rig stopped at her farm she drew forth a pencil and paper from her small purse and wrote in the moonlight, pressing the paper to her knee. 'There it is. Can you read it?'

He glanced at the paper and nodded bewilderedly.
'Cecy Elliott, 12 Willow Street, Mellin Town, Illinois,' he said.

'Will you visit her someday?' asked Ann.
'Someday,' he said.
'Promise?'

'What has this to do with us?' he cried savagely. 'What do I want with names and papers?' He crumpled the paper into a tight ball and shoved it in his coat.

'Oh, please promise!' begged Cecy.
'…promise…' said Ann.

‘All right, all right, now let me be!’ he shouted.

I’m tired, thought Cecy. I can’t stay. I have to go home. I’m weakening. I’ve only the power to stay a few hours out like this in the night, traveling, traveling. But before I go…
‘…before I go,’ said Ann.

She kissed Tom on the lips.
‘This is me kissing you,’ said Cecy.

Tom held her off and looked at Ann Leary and looked deep, deep inside. He said nothing, but his face began to relax slowly, very slowly, and the lines vanished away, and his mouth softened from its hardness, and he looked deep again into the moonlit face held here before him.

Then he put her off the rig and without so much as good night was driving swiftly down the road.
Cecy let go.

Ann Leary, crying out, released from prison, it seemed, raced up the moonlit path to her house and slammed the door.

Cecy lingered for only a little while. In the eyes of a cricket she saw the spring night world. In the eyes of a frog she sat for a lonely moment by a pool. In the eyes of a night bird she looked down from a tall, moonhaunted elm and saw the lights go out in two farmhouses, one here, one a mile away.

She thought of herself and her Family, and her strange power, and the fact that no one in the Family could ever marry any one of the people in this vast world out here beyond the hills.

‘Tom?’ Her weakening mind flew in a night bird under the trees and over deep fields of wild mustard. ‘Have you still got the paper, Tom? Will you come by someday, some year, sometime, to see me? Will you know me then? Will you look in my face and remember then where it

was you saw me last and know that you love me as I love you, with all my heart for all time?'

She paused in the cool night air, a million miles from towns and people, above farms and continents and rivers and hills. 'Tom?' Softly.

Tom was asleep. It was deep night; his clothes were hung on chairs or folded neatly over the end of the bed. And in one silent, carefully upflung hand upon the white pillow, by his head, was a small piece of paper with writing on it.

Slowly, slowly, a fraction of an inch at a time, his fingers closed down upon and held it tightly.

And he did not even stir or notice when a blackbird, faintly, wondrously, beat softly for a moment against the clear moon crystals of the windowpane, then, fluttering quietly, stopped and flew away toward the east, over the sleeping earth.

The end