



BULL IN THE MAZE

Mabel episode twenty-three: Bull in the Maze. In which the saint speaks.

[INTRO:]

MABEL: Hi, you've reached Mabel Martin. I'm not here to take your call right now, so please leave a message after the beep. Thanks!

[BEEP]

ANNA: Hi, this is Anna Limon calling for Mabel Martin. I work for your grandmother as a home care assistant, and I wanted to –

[DISSOLVES INTO LAUGHTER]

Here's something funny, Mabel. I've been cultivating unkindness. I've been cultivating a lot of things – I'm a fertile field, it turns out – but unkindness is the most ... well, interesting. It is *unkind* of me to try and play a trick on you, when you are there and I am here and I can hear the heart of you aching down through the walls and the roots and the systems and the structures. When I know how you struggle, when I have to – when I can hear everything, warped and distorted but broadcast somehow like radio waves down the hollow bones in my ears all rattling and thrumming and I can't dig you out, Mabel, I can't reach my fingers deep enough inside my own brain, inside my own ribcage –

I don't believe you'll ever hear this. Not really. I am the smallest, most distant explorer writing a message in the sand of a beach no one has walked on or sailed past or flown over in a hundred thousand thousand years. So why am I doing it? Why am I whispering to the walls, like the woman in the Yellow Wallpaper with her terrible husband and her terrible doctor and her post-partum psychosis? Why even bother, Mabel?

Because I have to. Because you've become somehow integral. Without you, divorced from even the idea of you, I have no substance, no form. I wisp away like smoke. You are the – the antithesis that gives me definition. No pole without its antipode, arctic and Antarctic. Mabel and Anna.

There's a story down here about the sun and the moon. I'm not going to tell it to you. Another tragic love story, who needs that? Tragedy is the *point*. Oh, the sun and moon, they are two empresses who love each other dearly but they can never, never meet – and that's the thing with opposites, with antipodes, isn't it? They might be linked, they might exist only in tandem, but they're by nature distant. Eternally distant. That's the thing about tragedy, about tragic love stories: a happy ending is finite, but grief goes on and on and on and –

[BEEP]

Do you think you have a monopoly on anger? Do you think it's your birthright? Do you think just because I'm voiceless that I'm passive, that I'm just going to soak you up like a cloth with all of your poetic self-hatred and your directionless vitriol and your willful misinterpretation of *everything* –

[BEEP]

[RUNNING WATER; BELLS; STRANGE SINGING]

[BEEP]

Let me tell you a story.

Once upon a time there was a house. No, let me go earlier: once upon a time there was land, green and black and arched over the ocean, and on the land there were foxes, deer, martens, rabbits, bird-of-paradise, magnolia trees and black walnut trees and yew and fir and juniper, and in the air above

the land there were crows and gulls and sparrows and fruit bats and falcons, and below, in the cold of the underearth, there was – well.

Some man came and claimed the land as his own, as men tend to do, and he built on the hill a great grey house. To build on any land is imposition of the worst kind, but there are ways to mitigate that – offerings to be made, bargains to be negotiated. You know how it is. This man did none of those things, and so the house dug its nails into the land like a claw, and the land resented it. Tried to steal itself back from the roof-beams and foundations. Sent out spies, green invaders, sneaking tendrils of vine and root and lichen.

It wasn't the house's fault. Just like it wasn't Luna's fault that she was stolen and kept in a cage, just like it wasn't your fault you were born into the Martin family. The house wanted what all good houses want: to guard, to withstand, to be the strong exoskeleton to the soft red meat of the family within. But so much infiltration would make anyone wary. All those years and years and years of punishment, always needed at, always battered by winds and soaked by rains and ruined by ivy – how could anyone live through that without becoming bitter?

So the house said, stay. The house said, mine. The house said, no more; I am staking my claim; this is my family and I have a right to them, and if they leave me they will leave bereft, for *I am the house on the hill and this is my final testament.*

And under the house, in the land below the land, the king said –

[BEEP]

[SINGING]

[BEEP]

I am lying in a bed of laurel-leaves, looking up at the constellations picked out in firelight on the ceiling. Ceiling. That's not the right word for it – the structures down here don't have names like the ones above, or at least not names I know. Everything is too – uncontained; everything spills from one form to another.

I'm not – really anything like a person, Mabel. I mean, I had a job and a family and friends who I could go to the movies with, I had a car and a bank account and a nursing degree, but those things are the accessories to

personhood, you know what I mean? I don't – *didn't*, I didn't have any sense of. Of reality, of necessity. Nothing ever felt immediate. I got a job because that's what you're supposed to do. I did everything right, *everything*, on paper I was the most person I could possibly be – but it's, it didn't – nothing ever registered, nothing ever impacted. I was just waiting, and waiting.

I felt it, though. When they – doubled me. When they etched another Anna out of sticks and wax and Spanish moss. Mabel, *she was more real than I am*. Maybe – maybe you should have left her there, to trundle through the world in my place. She would have done a better job than I did.

Still, I'm glad. I'm glad you killed her. I felt that, too. It felt –

– immediate.

[BEEP]

Here's another story.

Once upon a time there was a king. King was his title and king was his role and king was his fortune, all the long replenishing and diminishing days of his life. He had lived under the hill, lived and died and lived again, ever since there was a hill at all. His kingdom was the long spool of dark beneath the surface of the known world. His courtiers were people made of teeth, people made of hyssop, people made of bones and membrane, people who were not really people, or not anymore. His eyes were fire, his will was steel.

Just as there are always seasons, the axes on which the earth perpetually turns, there is always a king in the dark of the labyrinth. He stormed and brooded and grew and died and rose like corn in the spring of the year, the king-ever-perishing, the geophyte king. His world was the dark, the dark of the underhill and the dark of roots-lain-dormant. Until he saw *her*: refracted, luminous, beautiful.

The language of death-in-life-in-death is violent, by necessity. These things – ancient darkness, endless ruin – they just *take*, they take and take, so that's what he did, too. He snatched Luna up. Fashioned a cage for her out of his own heart. Being what he is, I think it pleased him when she fought against her chains. I don't think that means he doesn't love her.

I watch him, when I can. His crown of antlers, of bone, of rose-thorn. His burning eyes. You know these people, Mabel. You know what they value:

loyalty, and talent, and beauty of a kind we don't understand in the world above, and *wit*, too, they value cleverness above almost all else – otherwise I wouldn't have been able to worm my way down here just by solving a few riddles. It makes me wonder. He punished Sally, he punishes her still, but do you think – do you think part of him would have admired her, too? Do you think part of him would have been grateful? If she hadn't been a coward, if she'd stuck to her promise and helped Luna escape. Her fault was her disloyalty, her failure. It makes me wonder if –

[BEEP]

Mabel, Mabel, Mabel, Mabel –

[BEEP]

I love you. It is a thing undiminished by distance, unaltered by impossibility. I love you and love you and love you, just as I am gone and gone and gone. I can't imagine a version of myself that would not love you. The false me, the sticks-and-stones me, did she love you too? Could you tell, looking into her eyes? I'm glad you killed her. I may not deserve you, but listen to me: neither does she.

You think I'm good. I'm not good. I dream of killing everything that stands between us. I have elaborate fantasies in which I push you up against a wall and scream at you until you take back each terrible thing you've said in my absence. I am jealous of everything – the world, the house, the garden – everything that gets to touch you, to see you clearly. You think I'm down here basking in the warmth of my own perfect sacrifice. I'm not. I'm learning bitterness, learning cruelty. Or re-learning them, like languages I heard my mother speak as a baby but was never taught to fit inside my own mouth. Nothing tastes good without you, Mabel, but cruelty, at least, slakes my hunger.

I dream of you. Sometimes in my dreams you are singing. Sometimes you're raging at me. It's selfish of me to say *don't leave me*. To beg – no, to command you never to forget me, never to stop speaking to me, no matter how many miles and dimensions separate us. I don't care. Don't leave me. Don't leave me. Don't leave me.

[OUTRO]

This is Becca De La Rosa, one of the co-creators of Mabel, and before I read the end credits I have a special message for you: because you all constantly amaze us with your interest, your talent, your analytical skills, and your dedication to the show, we have hidden somewhere within season three a secret message. The message will not be complete until the season is finished. The first person to send us the finished message in full through the messaging system on our website will receive a substantial prize, and one we both frankly want to keep for our own. More details will be made available soon, but for now, all you need to do is keep consuming the show.

Mabel was created by Becca De La Rosa and Mabel Martin. This episode was written, performed and produced by Becca De La Rosa. The music in this episode was by Ars Sonor, Sergey Cheremisinov, Black Ant, All Shall Be Well (and All Shall Be Well and All Manner of Things Shall Be Well), Janneh, Deathbird Stories, Kai Engel, and (morse), and all of it is available to download from the Free Music Archive at freemusicarchive.org. For more information about this episode, including a full tracklist and transcript, visit us online at mabelpodcast.com. We rely on your help to keep Mabel going. If you enjoy what we do, please check out the range of rewards on our Patreon at patreon.com/mabelpodcast.