

The Wuss and the Witch

by Barry R. Taylor

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He called it The Wuss: a combination of *wound* and *fuss*. It was no bigger than a dime. Yet it dominated his life.

The Wuss sat on the outside of his right thigh. It was mostly scar tissue. A metal rod, thrust by an angry hand, had penetrated deep into his leg, creating a circular wound. Left to itself it would never heal completely. The surgeons had given him a couple of skin grafts to seal the exposed tissue. But a new-moon sliver along the bottom of the original gash had never quite healed up. He gave it ointment from time to time to prevent infection. It was a minor nuisance.

A bigger problem was that The Wuss leaked. The thin crescent along the bottom dribbled a clear, oily fluid when he was stressed, or his pulse ran high. He thought of it as his leg shedding tears. His morning run or a game of pick-up basketball would make it weep; so would a job interview or a first date. Fortunately, from the nuisance perspective anyway, Sam had very few of those.

Most of the time he covered The Wuss with a narrow brace, held in place by velcro straps. It was a gift from the folks at the armed forces rehab centre. When he anticipated physical activity or a difficult situation he added a bit of liner to help absorb the exudate. He had long ago discovered that sanitary pads worked well. He rarely wore shorts.

Sam volunteered at the city library three days a week. The idea was part self-therapy and part avoidance: volunteering was a way for him to be around people without having to interact with them. Sam collected books for reshelving (reshelving itself was a union job), cleaned up conference rooms after meetings, put magazines back on the rack. Serving at the help desk or helping patrons find their way was not for him. He was good at trouble-shooting computers. The big library had a lot of computers.

The library was where he met Morwenna. In truth, he could hardly say that he met her; he couldn't remember a moment when they had introduced themselves. She was around the library so often that eventually they came to know each other by name. Morwenna was a dark-eyed, dark-haired woman who favoured long, flowing skirts and bangles, as if she were

channeling a 1960s flower girl. She was a historian or something, doing research on medieval texts. She seemed to live in the climate-controlled, dimly lit, Rare Books section, behind the sliding glass doors.

Sam had seen some of the books she worked on. Some were in Latin, or in an ancestor of modern English that he couldn't read. Most were faded and very hard to read anyway. A few were so old they were technically codexes, so Morwenna insisted: pages sewn together between protective covers, an early predecessor of 'book'.

Sam had no idea what her research was about. He was there to fix the computer. The library had access to a growing collection of digitized, enhanced pages from great libraries around the world. Morwenna spent as much time studying pages on a screen as looking at the real books around her. Sometimes she printed out pages, which she then marked up with notes and question marks. One that Sam noticed looked like a page out of a twelfth century recipe book.

"That should do it," Sam said one day, as he closed the case on the big printer along the wall. "It was just a paper jam, again."

"Thank you, again," said Morwenna, who was waiting, quite impatiently, nearby. "I'll never get through this work if that thing keeps jamming."

"All the printers should be replaced," Sam assured her. "The librarians tell me it's a question of budget."

She glared at him. "Aren't you a librarian then?"

"No, I just volunteer. Gets me out of the house. They're short staffed."

"I see," she replied, as if he had proffered a weak excuse for being late. She gave him a deep, considering look. "You don't have a job," she pronounced.

It was a blunt assertion, especially toward a man she barely knew. "No, I . . . I have a pension. From the armed forces."

"Ah. You're a soldier then."

"I was a soldier. Not any more. Now I fix computers. I think –"

She was still studying him with those intense dark eyes. "You've seen action, haven't you."

Sam felt his pulse quicken. He disliked talking about his time over there. "Yes. Yes I did. In Afghanistan. I did . . . two tours. Two tours. In Afghanistan. I –" He drew a deep

breath. "Excuse me, I have to go. Call me if the printer acts up." He hurried away. The Wuss was weeping. He found an empty meeting room where he could get his breathing back under control. It took a while. Sam's time in the service had left him with more than a medal and a medical discharge.

A few days later, Sam was busy gathering books from the reading tables when he encountered Morwenna again. "Hello Sam," she said, right beside him.

Sam jumped. "What! What's that!" he exclaimed. "Oh. Morwenna. Didn't hear you coming."

"I can be quiet when I want to be," she replied. Today she was all in black, right down to the low-heeled boots protruding below her skirt. "We are in a library."

"True enough." He tried to laugh but it didn't sound convincing. "But you shouldn't sneak up on a guy."

"Forgive me," she said. "You are easily startled, aren't you."

"You might say that."

She was giving him that penetrating look. She said, "You walk with a limp sometimes. Why is that?"

Again her directness caught him off guard. The woman had boundary issues. "Oh, it's nothing. I was wounded; you know, over there. Stabbed, actually. Left me with a bit of muscle stiffness. Nothing to worry about."

"Oh, I see. It doesn't hurt you, does it?"

"Oh no. Only when I'm really tired. I usually don't even notice."

Morwenna was still studying him. It was disconcerting. "Yet you are deeply troubled," she pronounced. She sounded like a doctor making a grim diagnosis. "Your aura speaks of a restless soul."

"Say what? My aura?" Now the conversation was getting weird.

She didn't explain. Instead she said, "You know, it's all right to get help for your battle wounds."

"Well, like I said, it's fine, really. Just a nuisance, that's all." He felt his pulse quickening. Stay calm, stay calm.

She gave him a kind look with those soulful eyes. "Oh Sam, I wasn't talking about your limp." She ran one hand down the side of his face, surprisingly gentle. "You're a good man,

Sam. You're willing to make sacrifices. You shouldn't have to deal with all this pain by yourself."

The conversation was making Sam very uncomfortable. It had been a long time since a woman had paid him attention. Morwenna was attractive. Her eyes were bright. Beneath her flowing garments her body moved with a natural precision, smooth and sensuous. Sam noticed. The Wuss noticed.

He said, "Morwenna, please. I . . . don't like talking about . . . over there. It reminds me of . . . unpleasant things."

"I know," she said, and her tone said that she really did know. "You're carrying a weight of bad memories. Not uncommon among soldiers in action. I may be able to help you. I have some experience in these matters." She was standing close, gazing at him fondly. Those eyes!

Now he was fighting down panic. "Please, let's not – it's . . . it's difficult . . . I have had counselling."

She shook her head. Long hair glimmered. "I don't think more counselling is what you need. You need someone to take away the pain, to calm your aura."

That was too much. He stared at her. "I . . . have to go!" he almost shouted. Then he loped away, abandoning both the cart and the conversation. It took almost half an hour in the washroom to calm down. He had to change his tampon. Why did that woman insist on triggering him?

"Do you know anything about that woman, Morwenna, who's always in the rare books room?" Sam asked, a few days later. He was in a meeting room, cleaning up, along with an older librarian named Judy.

"You've noticed her have you?" Judy said, but she wasn't smiling. "I wouldn't get too close to her, if I were you. She's a strange one."

"Strange, yes. She told me there's a problem with my aura."

"Hmmm. That sounds like her. Weird woman." She hesitated, then continued, "I wonder if she's into, you know, the occult."

"Seriously? Like a witch or something? She told me she studies medicinal use of plants in the middle ages. Sounds harmless enough."

Judy frowned. "Does it? Then why is she going on about your aura, whatever that is. She does more than read those weird old books. I've seen her reading them aloud. In Latin.

Waving her arms around, like a priest doing a benediction. What's that all about? The way she looks at everybody with those deep eyes of hers. Like she's looking right into you. It's off-putting. And she gets way too personal with people she hardly knows. Rude." She paused again. "She told me one day, just passing by, that she could help with the arthritis in my knees. She gave me this powder, made from ground up plants she said, that I was supposed to put in my tea."

Sam was intrigued. "Did it work?"

"I don't know! Heavens, I threw it all away. You see, I hadn't told anybody about my arthritis, least of all her. How did she even know? There is something odd about that woman, Sam. Maybe best to keep your distance."

Sam frowned. Judy's was not the first warning he had heard that there was "something odd" about Morwenna. The woman had a reputation around the library.

"Sam, I'm sorry if I upset you the other day," Morwenna said, early the next week. Sam was behind the sliding glass doors again, helping with a file download from France. Sam was sitting in the chair in front of her usual computer. Morwenna was standing beside him, watching the monitor. She wore long, complicated earrings that matched the pendant dangling in her cleavage.

"Don't worry, it was nothing," Sam replied. "Now you see why I don't have a steady job."

"I was trying to help," she persisted. Today she was wearing some loose top-and-trousers outfit that reminded Sam of what a harem girl might wear in winter. "I really do have some experience with these things. I may be able to help you."

He looked up at her. "By calming my aura?"

"Yes, I know you don't believe in any of that," she responded. "Most people don't. But I may be able to help you deal with the turmoil in your mind. I would like to try. If you will let me."

He looked up at her. "Why?"

Now she was the one who looked nervous. "Because . . . because I like you, Sam. You're a genuinely nice person. You don't pass judgment. And it bothers me to see you in such psychic pain."

Sam frowned at that. He filed “psychic pain” on the same shelf as his “aura”. The librarians were right: Morwenna was flaky, or worse. Did she have to be so pretty?

He said, “What . . . what are you suggesting?”

“Come have dinner with me. At my place. We’ll talk about things. It will help.”

He felt his pulse quicken. The Wuss sent out a shiver of pain. He knew it was weeping. “Morwenna, I told you, I’ve had therapy. It . . . did as much as it could do.”

“I know. This isn’t therapy like you’re used to. It’s something else. A different way of healing. Let me try.”

Sam’s breathing was going shallow. Hyperventilation loomed. He was already thinking of bolting from the room. Dinner with an attractive woman? To talk about . . . over there? He wasn’t ready for any of that. Not yet; maybe not ever. He said, “Morwenna . . . I don’t think –”

She laid a hand on one shoulder. “Relax. Take a deep breath. No need to worry. I won’t do anything to stress you, I promise. Come over for dinner, just once, ok?” She grinned. “I’m a really good cook.”

Sam took a deep breath, as instructed. The hand on his shoulder was strangely calming. Her fingers bore several big rings. “When?” he asked.

“Tonight.”

“Tonight!” Too soon too soon too soon. The Wuss ached.

“Yes, tonight. So you don’t have time to talk yourself out of it.”

He looked into those knowing dark eyes. “Clever,” he admitted.

She smiled. “Be at my house at seven. I’ll text you the address. Don’t be late.”

He braced himself. “All right,” he said. “All right. Seven tonight. My cell number –”

“I already know it,” she replied, still smiling.

At seven o’clock the following evening, Sam was sitting in his car outside Morwenna’s house, trying to summon the courage to go in. He had been there for ten minutes already. The Wuss objected. His courage faltered.

Morwenna’s house was a two-bedroom bungalow in the older part of the city, probably built in the 1950s, when stucco was all the rage. The tidy fence around the front yard was natural, unpainted wood. The small yard had been given over to what looked like a herb garden. A flagstone path led through the garden to the front door.

He looked at his watch. It was exactly seven o'clock. He took a deep breath, then another. You can do this, he told himself. She understands your problem. She promised not to create stress. It's just dinner. The Wuss sent up a stab of pain as he climbed out of the car.

He opened the gate, stepped up the flagstones through the herb garden and rang the doorbell. The journey felt like a series of small, hard-fought victories. The garden was weedless, carefully tended. Someone said "please come in," from inside. Sam opened the door.

"And there you are," Morwenna greeted him, from the door of the kitchen. "Right on time, as I knew you would be. Don't stand there in the doorway, come on in." She had a spatula in one hand.

Sam came into what appeared to be the livingroom. The furnishings were as he expected: quirky, eclectic, interesting. Potted plants of all kinds and sizes dominated the room. Morwenna was dressed in her usual style, a peasant blouse and a long flowing skirt over flat sandals. This skirt was red, lighter and filmier than what she wore to the library. It hinted in shadows at the form beneath. Did she dress like that to work in the garden? He felt the Wuss weeping.

"Have a seat, I have something for you," his hostess said. She disappeared into the kitchen, only to return a few seconds later with a teacup on a saucer. "Here, drink this," she said, handing it to him. "It will help."

He was wary. "What is it?"

"Herbal tea. But there are herbs in it to help you relax. I expect you are a little stressed right now. Does your leg hurt?"

"Yes."

"Have some tea. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes."

They ate dinner in a small dining room with a big window overlooking the front garden. There were more plants there too. The meal was a one-pot stew or something, full of vegetables and beans and little bits that Sam didn't recognize. He dug in with gusto. Morwenna made comfortable small talk as they ate. Sam could tell that she was deliberately keeping the conversation light, and avoiding dark topics. He appreciated the effort.

"You weren't lying about being a good cook," Sam allowed. "This is very good."

"Oh, I never lie about food," Morwenna said, smiling. "It's important. Not only for nutrition but for finding satisfaction in the routines of daily life. A meal should be something one looks forward to."

“It would be easy to look forward to meals like this one,” Sam said. He nibbled on homemade bread, dense and flavourful.

“You see, that’s what I like about you. You take things as they come, without expectations. There are so many people – men especially – who would balk when they didn’t see meat and potatoes.”

He grinned, a rarity. “Remember, I was overseas. I’ve eaten army food, which automatically lowers one’s expectations. And there were lots of chances to sample Afghan food when I was . . . over there.” He felt a twinge in The Wuss. Shouldn’t have brought that up. He drank tea.

She became serious. “Are you ready to talk? Let’s go to the other room. Bring your tea.”

They settled in the living room among the futons and plants. Sam sat in a comfortable chair covered in throws. Morwenna said, “We need to talk about Afghanistan. About how you got your wounds.”

Instantly he was tense. He held the panic at bay, at least for the moment. Whatever was in Morwenna’s tea was effective. “I have only one wound,” he said.

“Only one physical wound,” she replied. “I need to hear this, but I don’t want to stress you. Tell me about it in the third person. Try to imagine you are watching yourself from above, an outside observer, detached and aloof. Describe the events as you would describe scenes from a movie.”

He hesitated. “Well, all right. It was late in my second tour – ”

“No, not your tour, Sam’s tour. Separate yourself from the events. Close your eyes. Tell me what happened to Sam.”

“Oh, I see.” He closed his eyes and leaned back into the chair. He sipped herbal tea. “It was after combat operations had officially finished,” he began, “but Canadian troops were still on the ground, trying to maintain order. The shooting war was over, but it was clear to anyone there that the propped up government wasn’t going to last. You can’t have democracy in a country with local warlords. By this time Sam had already seen enough death and suffering to last a lifetime.

“We were out on patrol one evening when we stumbled over a crime in progress. A gang of men had broken into a warehouse. There were loading fuel – gasoline, diesel, whatever –

onto a couple of trucks. It wasn't a military operation, they were just thieves. Very well armed thieves. Maybe they were minions of a local crime boss. Who knows? We – I mean, Sam's patrol – caught them by surprise. His sergeant shouted at them to stop, in a couple of languages, but they began firing on us instantly. Everyone jumped for cover. The incident became a firefight.

“Sam's unit was out-numbered and out-gunned. The sergeant told five men, including Sam, to slip through the abandoned building and come at them from the side. The manoeuvre worked. The thieves were caught by surprise by the flank attack. They took casualties, and many of them broke and ran. At the end though, as the Canucks closed in, the fighting became hand to hand. The thieves used knives, or anything at hand to defend themselves, and they were good at it.

“Sam, who was mostly a radio operator, saw three men with knives and pokers attacking a couple of his mates, who were already being pressed from the other side. Impulsively, he threw himself at the attackers, hit the ground in front of them and rolled over to knock their feet out from under them. The stunt worked, mostly, but the third man, who had picked up a metal rod from the street, managed to jam it into Sam's leg. After that there was shouting, and more shots fired, and the remaining attackers were dead or fleeing. Besides Sam, three men in the patrol were wounded. Luckily there were no fatalities.

“They gave Sam a medal. Courage in battle, though it was mostly stupidity. He went home with a limp and . . . The Wuss. A wound that keeps reminding him of all the stuff he saw over there.”

Morwenna had been listening closely. “What – what did you call it? Your wound?”

Sam opened his eyes. “The Wuss. The wound that weeps.”

“Is it weeping now?”

“Profusely.”

She was silent for a few heartbeats. She said, “I would like to see it.”

Sam was taken aback. “Morwenna, it's – it's on my thigh. My upper thigh. You know the old come-on line about ‘let me show you my war wound’? It's exactly like that.”

“I know. I'm not trying to embarrass you. Or confuse you. I'm starting to think this wound – The Wuss, as you call it – is more than an open sore. Please let me take a look.”

The situation had grown strange. Sam's instincts were screaming at him to bolt from the room. The Wuss was crying. By a desperate act of will he stayed calm, and stayed put. "I, I think I'm going to need some more tea," he managed.

Wordlessly, Morwenna left for the kitchen. She came back with another cup of steaming tea. Sam drank it quickly, using the action of drinking itself to steady his nerves. "All right," he declared, when he had finished. "All right. Let's introduce The Wuss to the world."

"I'll turn around until you are ready."

Sam stood. He unfastened his trousers and pushed them down his legs a little, until the brace came into view. "All right now," he said.

Morwenna took in his black brace at a glance. "Lie down over here," she instructed, pointing to something that could have been a futon or a sofa. He did as she asked, lying with his face toward the back. He began to loosen the strap on the brace. "Let me do it," his hostess said. There was kindness in her voice.

She deftly undid the strap and pulled the brace apart. Sam felt cold air on his wet skin. The tampon was soaked. "Oh, I see," Morwenna said. Her voice was soft. She drew out a pair of half-glasses from somewhere and put them on. She inspected The Wuss with a critical eye. Perhaps she was surprised at how small it was.

"Sam," she said after half a minute, "I may be able to help you with this. This wound, what you call The Wuss, is holding you back. You can't heal your mind – your aura, if you will – until you heal this wound."

"It will never heal, not completely," Sam objected. "The doctors said –"

"Yes, I know, that's not uncommon in puncture wounds like this. No skin-to-skin contact to initiate healing, as in a gash. But . . . there are more things on heaven and earth than dreamt of in your philosophies. And your doctors'. I may be able to help. Will you let me try?"

"How . . . how can you possibly hope to . . . I've had surgery for this."

I know. There are other ways to heal. But you have to trust me."

Sam thought about it. "I'm still here. I'm not having a panic attack, not yet anyway. You've seen The Wuss, which no one ever sees. So I guess I trust you."

"Stay here. Relax. This will take a few minutes." She strode briskly from the room, long skirt swaying.

How exactly he was supposed to relax while lying on an unfamiliar futon-thing with his pants around his knees was not obvious, but Sam did his best. He tried not to think about his time over there. He tried not to think about the sway of Morwenna's skirt. Both were upsetting, in different ways. He concentrated on his breathing. He used his determination to stay calm as a lance to ward off the circling dogs of panic.

In time Morwenna returned, bearing a tray with two glass bowls and a white washcloth. One of the bowls held warm water, the other a kind of tan paste that resembled putty. She set the tray on the floor, then settled herself on the edge of the futon. "I'll have to clean it, before we begin," she said. She was gentle and efficient with the washcloth. She rinsed it several times in the glass bowl.

"There now, she said at length. "Now we can start. This is going to sting." She gathered some of the paste from the second bowl and began to smear it on The Wuss. It smelled like an entire flower garden.

"Ouch!" Sam shouted, surprised. His leg jerked. "That's, that's a sting all right."

"The pain will diminish shortly. Let me begin." She began working the paste into The Wuss, in slow, circular strokes, first clockwise, then counterclockwise, always in complete circles. Then, unexpectedly, she began to sing. She sang, or rather chanted, in a dulcet tone, rather like a Gregorian chant, only softer, like a lullaby. The chant was in harmony with the motion of her fingers. She stopped from time to time to refresh the putty from the bowl.

Sam listened. The pain began to subside. The sensation of her fingers, rotating this way, then that, in tune with the sonorous chant, was deeply relaxing. Sam wasn't sure how long it went on. The panic dogs slipped away. He found himself falling asleep.

He couldn't have said how much later the chanting stopped. "I think we're all done," Morwenna said. Her voice was weak.

Sam sat up. Something felt different. He looked down at his thigh, where Morwenna was wiping up the last of the paste. The Wuss was gone. The weeping crescent was sealed. A circular scar, like a birthmark, revealed where the wound had been.

He looked at Morwenna. "It's – it's healed! How did you –" He stopped when he saw her face. Her eyes were half closed. She looked exhausted. "So glad . . . so glad it worked," she breathed, before collapsing in his arms.

“Whoa, that must have taken a lot out of you,” Sam cried. “Here, lie down for a while.” He got her settled on the futon where he had lain. She didn’t resist. He found a pillow somewhere for her head, then threw a couple of blankets over her. “Rest for a while, until you feel better,” he said. “And thank you.” Morwenna didn’t answer. She was already asleep.

Sam was sitting in an armchair reading a very old book on herbal remedies when Morwenna awoke. Afternoon sunlight slanted through the front window. She sat up, throwing off sleep and the blanket Sam had pulled over her. “What – ” she whispered.

Sam moved swiftly to steady her. “Take it easy,” he said, “Don’t try to get up too fast. Here, drink this.” He handed her a glass.

“What is it?”

“Apple juice. From your cupboard. Only comprehensible drink I could find.”

She drank. “Thank you.” Then: “How long . . . how long was I . . .”

“Better part of a day. It’s a little after four. I was starting to worry.”

“Oh my. And . . . you stayed here, the whole time? All day – and all night?”

He grinned. “That chair is surprisingly comfortable. Also you have an interesting library.” He scratched his chin. “I could use a shave.” An empty pizza box littered the floor. She sat up. “Thank you,” she said again.

Sam sat down beside her. He said, “So, the rumours I hear about you at the library are true.”

“Which rumours in particular?”

“That you really are a witch.”

She made a face. “Please. I am a practitioner of the ancient healing arts. There is no such thing as witchcraft. The idea of devil-worshipping witches flying on brooms and all that was fabricated by the Church in the middle ages as an excuse to torture people.”

“I know.”

She studied his face. “Now that you know who I am, what I do . . . does that bother you?”

“Not now. Not after I’ve seen what it can do. You sealed up The Wuss, Morwenna. It’s all gone. It’s The Wuss that was.” He held up his discarded brace like a hunter’s trophy.

She smiled. “That’s wonderful. Took a little more effort than I expected. It was holding you back, you know.”

“How so?”

“The Wuss told you what to do. You ran your life around not upsetting The Wuss. It gave you an excuse to avoid facing up to difficult things, like your memories from over there, your panic attacks, and the fact that you are a decent, likeable man who should have a job and a social life instead of hiding in the library.”

He nodded. “The Wuss almost didn’t let me come to see you, you know.”

“I guessed as much. We couldn’t really get anywhere until you overruled The Wuss and made your own decision.” She looked thoughtful for a moment. Then she said, “Now that The Wuss is whipped, we can speculate about it without risk of hurting you. I wonder . . . how would The Wuss respond to something really stressful . . . like this?” She leaned over and kissed him, gently, on the cheek.

Sam gulped. “The – The Wuss would be gushing.”

“Gushing?” She was teasing him now.

“Like an open faucet.”

“No need to worry about that any more. But we have more work to do, you and I. Without The Wuss in way, I think you have a good chance of getting over your trauma from Afghanistan. Wouldn’t that be better?”

“Much better.”

“It will require time, and patience, and many healing sessions. Here. Maybe after dinner. Are you up for that?”

“Absolutely. You are a very good cook. For a vegetarian.”

“When would you like to begin?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Tomorrow.”

“That soon?”

“Yes. So you don’t have time to talk yourself out of it.”

She smiled at that. “Fine. Right now I need to shower. And eat something. I’ll see you tomorrow evening. At seven.”

“I won’t be late.”

He let himself out. His leg didn’t hurt. He walked out the door, down the flagstone path, through the herb garden, to his car. Every step felt like a celebration.