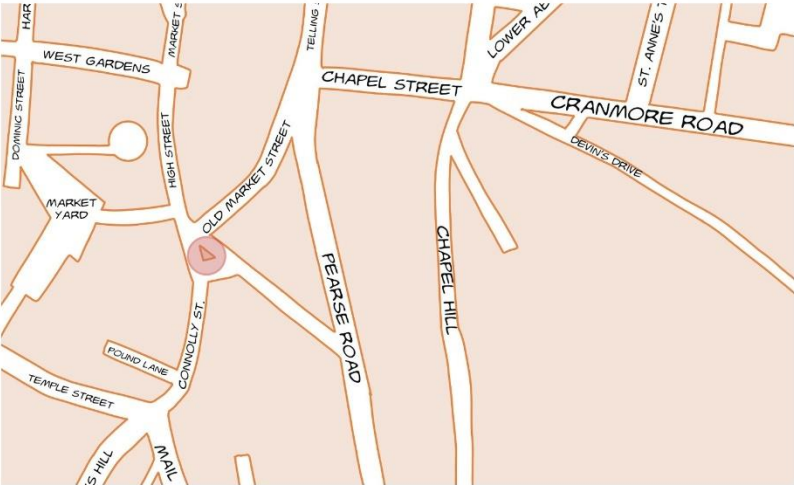


In a small triangular green, at the top of Market street, two cherry blossom trees grow. It is here our first story takes place- a tale of mysterious communications during a lonely time...



# THE CHERRY BLOSSOM TREE AND THE CURSE OF THE WEEB

by Wyrld Caldron

I decided on an ominous lifestyle at the beginning of the first lockdown. I was more afraid during the pandemic than most- it worked on my tendency to overthink things, and I filled the empty hours with thoughts of disease. Already being isolated and now being temporarily out of a job, I saw this as my chance to sever all ties not just with people and their germs, but with society at large.

So, I inverted my sleep schedule. I'd wake a little before midnight, eat, shower and take a relaxed wander around Sligo in its deserted state. Even during the day, the town was eerily quiet, but at night no one ventured out- it was like an even lower budget 28 Days Later. I'd sightsee, fully masked despite being the only person in sight, until I tired of it and went home to play Rocket League or write moribund poetry about deserted streets at night and shafts of light.

I was living in an inverted world- everything I did was to avoid fear, but it was making me paranoid, superstitious and more prone to fear than I had ever been. The more I simplified my world, the more any minor disturbance could swallow me whole. Any minor symptom I heard about I would immediately identify in myself and spend days worrying over.

I had no sun in my life anymore, but I did allow myself one reminder of the bright Spring that was happening while I slept. The two cherry blossom trees on the corner of High Street and Connelly happened to come into bloom just as lockdown was starting to feel real, and they became a fixture of my nightly walks. I would always visit them on the way home, usually around 3 or 4am. They were almost neon pink compared to the sulphurous light the streets were bathed in.

The scent was piercing, the Spring sun and all its clarity were in the bitter edge of it. I would stand between the cherry blossom trees and take off my mask for a moment, as if I was an astronaut testing the air of an alien world.

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At first, I only noticed peripherally that there was a poster tacked onto one of the cherry blossom trees. It was copier paper with a badly xeroxed photo in the centre and was headed with a name in bold sans serif font. A missing persons poster, I guessed. It didn't mean much to me, frankly. I was going out of way to avoid people at the time. I was pretty much a missing person myself, only no one was looking for me.

Only after a couple of weeks did I begin to register something very odd. The poster was different each time I looked- someone was changing it every night. And the names were... strange:

Pinkus Fowler

Glasnost O'Malley

Linus Strawberry

Venus O'Toole

Andy PikPik McNaught

Lala Winters

They all seemed like nicknames or nonsense. Some of the posters just bore phrases like 'Thrash the rabbits' or 'scrubbed in the carpark'. Even stranger, none of the posters had any contact details. Just the names and a barely legible photo, all cavernous shadows about the eyes and brutal simplicity in low resolution black and white.

They were a bit creepy, but so was my frame of mind at the time, so it became a hobby of mine to see the new poster each night and snap a photo of it. I'd google the text at home, to no result. I'd check the papers and social media for news of anyone missing, but there was nothing and certainly not a new missing person every night.

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Lockdown was going to end soon. I was giddy with sleeplessness, trying to get my body clock back to normal in time for going back to work, so I got to the cherry blossom trees a couple of hours earlier than usual, around 2am.

A sloping figure stood there, about to nail the latest poster onto one of the trees. For some reason, I'd never considered meeting the person putting up these weird artefacts, but now here he was.

He had a bloody nose he kept wiping with his sleeve and moved with slow, heavy lurches that made me wonder if he was drunk. One shoulder was low as if his body hung from the tensed up, hunched shoulder he swung the hammer with. His head was badly shaven, scuds of hair untouched at the base of the skull. Most eery was his expression, despite the bloody nose, despite the brutal, drunken swings of the hammer, he had this clear eyed, nearly kindly expression that he gazed into the night with.

I hid in a doorway when I saw him, checking my mask was firmly in place. He seemed oblivious. After nailing the latest poster up, he began muttering something whilst staring up at the blossoms, rubbing his eye. I'd gone to jelly, unsettled by a subtle wrongness in the situation. I clearly wasn't meant to be here watching, he was in his private world just as much as I usually was. Carefully, I started back down Connelly street, suddenly aware of every rustle my clothes made, but just as the figure began to dwindle into the shadows, I saw his eyes flash to where I was. I saw him tense and start towards me, hammer limp at one side.

I took off at a run.

Going through Market Yard, down the Lungy, past the Westlife Mural, the heartbeat was pounding in my ears. Whenever I looked back, I could see him taking corners with the sloppy agility of a surefooted sailor on a heaving deck. Everywhere I went the streets were deserted but for the sharp sound of his steps, and him shouting for me to wait.

I probably lost him pretty quickly, looking back on it. But shadows at night have a habit of catching you wrong, looking like they belong to someone right behind you. I kept running for a long while, jumping at my own threshing shadow and looking behind me.

I hadn't wanted to lead him back to my house, so I'd gone far out of my way by the time I stopped to catch my breath. I felt more alone than I had throughout the whole lockdown, uncertain whether I was still in danger and a long walk back to my empty apartment ahead of me. Not the running, but the shock had taken all the energy out of me. As I walked home slowly, I felt that figure on the edge of my awareness, following.

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That was the end of my nightly walks. Soon the lockdown ended and I started back in my old job, seeking out friends whenever I could. I left the ominous life the moment it became real, and despite the strangeness of it all, I forgot all about the posters and the cherry blossom trees, all about the desperate chase in the dark. After all, had I really been chased, or had I just freaked myself out, convinced I had been followed in my exhausted state?

Much later, I started showing the photos around, asking if anyone else had seen the posters or knew any of the names, of course, no one had. The idea of the posters changing every night baffled them. The names they only laughed at. The faces on the other hand, however badly xeroxed they were, people did sometimes seem to recognise. One friend swore his aunt's picture appeared under the name 'Tantric McGooge'.

And then, the photographs started appearing, months later, beside obituaries in the weekender and the Champion. This was how I learned the actual names that went to these photos. I looked them up- none had gone missing; none had any relation to one another. Most had died of old age or long-term illness, nothing suspicious. Slowly my reel of photos was all accounted for in the course of a few months, and the grim story came to an end.

At least it had seemed to, until I spoke to my friend and collaborator in paranormal research, Technopagan. I had been theorising that this man might have had the ability to predict deaths, perhaps an innate ability awoken by the stress of the pandemic, and in his own demented way had been trying to warn everyone with these posters. Technopagan, However, had a different theory. "A while ago, on a podcast I listen to," he began, "they recounted the legend of

The Ox-Hour Visit, which sounds a lot like what you're describing. It's a curse from ancient Japan, that has to be cast in the dead of the night- the Ox Hour, which is about 2 am, and is meant to involve nailing a straw effigy of the target onto a sacred tree. Of course, in this case it was a more direct effigy, a photo. If the curse is successful, the target dies, but if anyone sees you perform the ritual, not only will it not work, but the curse is turned back on you- the only way to escape it is to kill the person who witnessed you perform the ritual! It sounds to me like you had a lucky escape."