

Vincent Van Gogh,  
'Green Corn Stalks, 1888':



# Tithe

Emma Newrick

**I**t doesn't seem to matter to the Reaper Lady if the corn dolls look much like people or not, which is just as well because mine never do. Mother's were always delicate little dancers, arms outstretched and elegant skirts flying. I don't know how she managed to make bundles of straw appear so lifelike, but that's the least of the tricks she failed to teach me before she died. If I could ask her anything I wouldn't waste a question on the tithe dolls – I'd want to know how she managed to feed the three of us on a farm labourer's wages when the Reaper Lady was angry and the crops failed, or how she coaxed my sister Annie to sleep every night.

Annie's almost four now, but she's not like the other children. Billy and Grace next door run around the village chasing chickens and digging in the mud by the millpond. Annie laughs at things that no one else can see, cries at things that aren't there, and speaks to no one, real or imagined. It wasn't so bad when she was a baby and she looked just like all the others, but once she was up and walking, people started to talk. *Fairy-touched*, Ellen Brady once snapped, staring over the garden wall. I remember Mother's mouth pinching into a thin line, and then she called Ellen a word that at twelve I'm not supposed to know.

Fairy-touched or not, Annie's still my sister and when Mother died last winter there was nothing else I could do but find a way to take care of her. When she was smaller I could take her into the fields strapped to my back, but now I pay old Nan to mind her. Nan's not my nan, or anyone else's as a matter of fact, but she's lived in the village longer than even old Mr Elwood the miller and, while people might mutter, they won't do anything to cross her. There's no one else I'd dare leave Annie with.

Sometimes I pay Nan a few coins, sometimes it's bread I've baked after I've worked at the mill and taken home the flour sweepings, and sometimes I repay her with work; weeding in her garden or the washing that she can't really manage. It doesn't matter what I give her, we can ill afford to spare any of it, but on days when I feel I can't go on I think of Mother watching us from wherever she is. I don't want her to be disappointed in me.

My doll's finished: a lumpen, misshapen thing, speckled with blood where my fingers blistered as I twisted the tough stalks together. I'm glad that no one will see it. The other girls usually sit by the harvest bonfire to make their dolls, sharing last harvest's cider and

trading stories. I tell myself I don't care that they don't want me there. Though I do wish I could hear the stories.

I leave Annie at Nan's. My sister's eyes are over-bright, and she reaches for the darkness in the corner of the kitchen with the hand that's not clutching her rag doll. Today is one of her bad days. 'I'll not be long,' I say, pressing a basket into Nan's arms. It contains the last of our bread, so we'll be eating apples for supper tonight, which is supposed to be unlucky at harvest. As it's that or go to bed hungry, I'm willing to risk the apples.

Nan looks at my sister, who is now crouched facing the dark corner, laughing and waving her hands about the way the village women do when they're passing on a particularly juicy piece of gossip, and she turns rheumy blue eyes on me. 'What will you do, Kate?' she says. I don't know how to answer that question, because it's hard and the truth is I don't know what I will do; each day feels like I'm plugging a hole in a dyke with my finger and the problem with that is that it works, right up until it doesn't. So I don't say anything.

I carry my doll to the top of the field, hurrying a little so I'll be sure not to meet any of the others, and place it gently in one of the corn furrows. A few rows behind I see Nan's doll, already there, with a scrap of red ribbon looped around its head like a crown. And that's our tithe left for the harvest, in the hopes that the Reaper Lady will be kind and this one won't rot in its stacks, and that the next harvest will be plentiful.

I walk back to Nan's as slowly as I dare, because the sun is sinking and turning the stubbled fields to molten gold, and for these few precious minutes I don't have to worry about Annie, and I can breathe. And then it all goes wrong.

The door to Nan's cottage stands open and Ellen Brady backs out of it, her hands over her mouth. I push past her. The fire's burned down low but it's enough for me to see Nan in her chair, her eyes closed, and her chest not moving, and I'm not as shocked as I should be because it's peaceful, not like Mother, and because the loudest thought in my head is *where is Annie?*

She's not in the cottage, and the darkness in the corner somehow seems more empty than it did before. I dart around the bonfire. No Annie. I think of the millpond and its black depths, just as deadly as any fairy-tale monster when you're four years old.

Then I see Annie's rag doll lying on the path leading across the harvest field, and I start to run. I stumble past neat ranks of corn dollies lined up, *pretty maids all in a row*. I don't slow; I know where I'm going. And there it is, the corn doll I made, mottled with my blood, no longer standing in the furrow and marked as our tithe, but discarded as carelessly as the rag doll. And beyond it, in the Reaper Lady's arms, my sister.

The Lady is taller than the stacks that surround her, her body longer and thinner than any human woman's. Her hair is as golden as wheat, and her nose is buried in my sister's hair, inhaling hungrily the way I'd sniff fresh-baked bread. Annie regards me incuriously, as though I'm no more interesting than the stubbled furrows.

I pick up the corn doll, and hold it out. My hands are unsteady, and my blisters sting. The Lady sniffs again, greedily, and I realise they're bleeding. She looks from me to my sister, her eyes black as rot from edge to edge. I step forward and she hisses, angrily, the sound like the wind whipping through the wheatfields, flattening our precious corn. Mould begins to bloom on the stack beside her.

'Please,' I whisper. But it's no good, she doesn't want my doll and, as she looks again from me to Annie, I finally see the choice I have to make. She wants me, or my sister. I should go with her; that's what a good older sister should do. That's what Mother would want me to do. But Annie wouldn't last a day here alone, without me or Nan to look after her. I know what people in this village do to the fairy-touched.

And I remember the feeling of freedom as I walked through the stubbled fields without her, and a shameful, insistent part of me doesn't want to let that go. The Reaper Lady waits, her black eyes hungry but empty of judgement. And I make my choice.

They say that there's a village where at harvest time two figures walk the fields, collecting the tithe: one tall and one small. I wouldn't know. I've never been back. Even after all these years I'm still not sure what I'm more afraid of: that it's true ...

Or that it isn't.



**Emma Newrick**