

# THE WITCH'S TRINITY

*Erika Mailman*



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THE  
WITCH'S  
TRINITY

*a novel*

ERIKA  
MAILMAN



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*To Mary Bliss Parsons*



*After she has been consigned to prison in this way, the promise to spare her life should be kept for a time, but after a certain period she should be burned.*

—MALLEUS MALEFICARUM

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*It has indeed lately come to Our ears, not without afflicting Us with bitter sorrow, that in some parts of Northern Germany, as well as in the provinces, townships, territories, districts, and dioceses of Mainz, Cologne, Trèves, Salzburg, and Bremen, many persons of both sexes, unmindful of their own salvation and straying from the Catholic Faith, have abandoned themselves to devils, incubi and succubi, and by their incantations, spells, conjurations, and other accursed charms and crafty enormities and horrid offences, have slain infants yet in the mother's womb, as also the offspring of cattle, have blasted the produce of the earth, the grapes of the vine, the fruits of the trees, meadows, and women, beasts of burthen, herd-beasts, as well as animals of other kinds, vineyards, orchards, meadows, pasture-land, corn, wheat, and all other cereals; these wretches furthermore afflict and torment men and women, beasts of burthen, herd-beasts, as well as animals of other kinds, with terrible and piteous pains and sore diseases, both internal and external; they hinder men from performing the sexual act and women from conceiving, whence husbands cannot know their wives nor wives receive their husbands; over and above this, they blasphemously renounce that Faith which theirs by the Sacrament of Baptism, and at the instigation of the Enemy of Mankind they do not shrink from committing and perpetrating the foulest abominations and filthiest excesses to the deadly peril of their own souls, whereby they outrage the Divine Majesty and are a cause of scandal and danger to very many.*

—FROM THE PAPAL BULL OF INNOCENT VIII, 1484

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## IN THE SECOND YEAR OF NO HARVEST, 1507 TIERKINDDORF, GERMANY

It was a winter to make bitter all souls. So cold the birds froze midcall and our little fire could not keep ice from burrowing into bed with us. The fleas froze in the straw beds, bodies swollen with chilled blood.

We were hungry.

It had been a poor year for grain, like the year before, and the blasted field was now covered with snow. What game there was starved too, their ribs plain as kindling. But soon enough we ate all of those and there were no longer claw marks leading us along their little paths.

The lord's mill, which Jost ran, hadn't been in use for years. When I looked upon the mill wheel a fortnight ago, a cobweb stretched from the hub to the teeth. No one had any grain to grind and so our barter was based on "next harvest." Last year, the lord had released the vassals from obligation and we had all walked the furrows of the tilled earth many times, seeking a scrap thought useless before, even chaff, something to put into our mouths. The soil was as if salted. Seeds went into it only to fester and wither. We did all manner of things to change our fortune. We prayed in the way that the priest asked us to, with the Lord's Prayer, raising our eyes to heaven as we spake of the daily loaf God might grant us. Incense cloyed our throats as we prayed again and again, asking Mary's help as well. We became as gaunt as the saints carved onto the boards of the altar.

And we also did what the priest asked us not to do. Facing to the west, where the sun sets, we slaughtered beasts and poured the blood onto the soil. We dabbed blood into the middle of our palms to represent the harvest we wished to hold. We sang the old songs, our voices hushed so that the ancient music would not drift back to the church. We could not eat the meat of the ritual beasts, and so with tears in our eyes we burned the goats we might have eaten. We watched the smoke drift with the cold wind, incense the earth might prefer to the sweetish cloud from the censer.

We scolded the fields as if they were children; we threw the silt at the sky in a dusty haze and screamed. Künne Himmelmann slept with a clod beneath her pillow.

And nothing changed.

Nothing changed except that snow fell.

My son, Jost, and his wife, Irmeltrud, never spake in jest anymore; never did they laugh. No one did. I felt worst for the young ones. I had already had a lifetime when food was plentiful and neighbors bantered with each other, but they had not known lightness, only heavy, stolid days. I tried now and then to tell funny stories to Alke and Matern, my grandchildren, stories my parents had once told me.

of old Lenne kissing her brother by mistake, deep in her cups, or the year the maypole came crashing down and all the girls were cross for thought of the bad luck it brought. But I was the only one who made such effort, and after a time of watching the moveless faces of my family, I ceased myself. Alke and Matern were always solemn. Because they were so thin, they didn't have the strength to race each other into the woods as children should. They played their games close to the fire, and oftentimes their shoulders were joined. I knew they sat that way to keep each other warm.

Alke, the elder, would have no doubt been the prettiest one in the village if only there were color and plumpness to her cheeks. But her blond hair, which should have shone like poppy oil, was lusterless. She had not much spirit to her. In several seasons, she would be marriageable, but would she be able to flirt at Mayfest to gain a lover, as Künne and I had done so shamelessly when we were her age?

And Matern, the boy, was made like a girl by these circumstances. Tears came to his eyes easily and he was hurt by the smallest slight. The idea of him cleaving to a woman and taking care of all the household's needs—hunting and wood getting—seemed an impossibility. Matern would always be helpless, an eternal child created by the absence on the table. And so we all did our best to exist in the same cottage without food, letting the silence fall upon all of us. If my Hensel had been yet here, he would have made them merry, but he died when Jost was yet a child, turning the world upside down like a plate.



“Mutter, Großmutter has hardly any soup,” said Matern, eyeing my bowl.

“Soup's for those who work,” said Irmeltrud. “Those who barely move all the day long need little to sustain them.” Jost tried to catch her eye, but she wouldn't let him. Such a thing was true, but she was ashamed to have spoken it.

We all sat at the table, backs straight in the formal wish that there might be real food served upon the benches. Members of my family had sat upon these benches for so many generations, I felt the grooves placed by their more ample bodies. Of course, they had assembled for several meals each day, while we now gathered in the late afternoon for our sole serving.

The soup looked hardly worth the having, coins of carrot floating in water barely flavored with rosemary. The sojourn in the soup pot had likely not softened these rough roots. We had not had meat since Michaelmas. When Irmeltrud turned her back to fill Matern's bowl, Jost poured some of his soup into mine. “No, son,” I said in a low voice. He set his jaw. When Irmeltrud sat down, I saw her notice the sudden difference in my bowl. Her eyes narrowed and I thought, as I often had, how her face expressed the very fume of Eve when she realized the apple had undone all the good. Years ago Irmeltrud used to smile at me, thinking that earning Jost's favor required mine. She asked my advice in all things and was hesitant as a midafternoon spider. As soon as the marriage banns were read



however, a sourness crept into her face and she has been so with me ever since.

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We all held hands while Jost said the prayer of thanks. Alke's fingers were impatient in my right hand, while my left stretched across the table to capture Matern's. And then we all picked up our spoons and wetted our tongues.

At least it was hot.

Heat added flavor to things that had none, we had learned.

I took a spoonful into my mouth and simply sat with it, one carrot coin sitting on my tongue like communion crumb. I closed my eyes to fully sense it, the meager gift of water with a ghost of taste. Everyone else plunged in with quick spoons, as if it would wink at them and run out the door if they did not hurry.

"What has Ramwold said this day?" asked Irmeltrud, in between gulps. Jost and the other village men had gone to hear him read the runes.

"He said the winter is yet to stretch more grievous," said Jost. Some *Suppe* dribbled from his mouth from the haste. He used no cloth to wipe his face, only his own tongue, to not waste even a drop.

"Can it be so?" asked Irmeltrud in a horrified tone. "What have we done to bring this?"

"I know not, but there is talk of a hunting party to gather together. The woods here are emptied."

"Better to solve the reason for our hunger than to lose yourselves to a boar's tusks or worse betide. The woods are full of the devil's minions."

"Solve it, Mutter? How?" asked Matern with wide eyes.

"By seeking the source of the evil and suppressing it," said Irmeltrud. She had already reached the bottom of her bowl, despite her talking, and clapped it down on the board. Her eyes snaked over my mine. "Someone is making mischief and bringing misery to this village," she said. "One who has made a bargain with the devil and benefits from our distress."

"We all toil in sin," said Jost. "Yet I know of no one who would have struck such a bargain."

"Not all toil," she said, and looked into my eyes. I saw no warmth there. "There's talk of old Künne Himmelman."

"What manner of talk?" Jost's voice took on an edge of anger.

"The Töpfers say their hen has stopped laying. She is simply dried of eggs. And this happened after Künne sat down on a rock by their door."

"Everyone sits at that rock," said Jost. "The children sit there to play, the women sit on that rock to card their wool. And an old one such as Künne, to be walking the road, she'd have to tarry a bit to rest her feet."

“But the hen?”

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“The hen is as hungry as the rest of us and hasn’t the will to push out eggs,” said Jost.

I stared down at the rind of carrot spinning slowly in my bowl. Künne was my friend. I remember when her hair had been flaxen, her braids thick as a goose neck. Now they were thin and graying, straggled like mine. I had taken only one sip from the bowl but could eat no more. If Künne was being talked of in this way, she was in danger. A Dominican friar had come to our village a week ago—he had been the one to speak of God punishing one of our villagers by withholding the harvest from everyone. I nodded to Jost and began to push my bowl across the board to him. He smiled weakly, knowing what Künne was to me. My shaky fingers, barely recognizable to me now as those that once so easily did my bidding, pushed too hard and the bowl spilled.

“Fool!” said Irmeltrud as she stood and tried to scoop the liquid back into the bowl. “You’ve wasted an entire bowl. Would that you worked for it yourself, you’d treat it a little more carefully!”

It was true. I’d done naught to prepare for this repast. My fingers were too shaky for the knife to cut the carrots and my frame too frail to carry water to the cauldron.

The soup dripped down onto the dirt below. Jost’s face registered the regret that he had given me of his, and now it was lost to both.

“I don’t know how we’re to keep all these mouths full, Jost,” said Irmeltrud, turning her ire to him. “It’s barely enough to even wet the teeth. There’s too many in this house.”

“Calm yourself. All’s here that needs to be, and we will fill our stomachs when winter passes, God willing,” he said.

“I can barely think, I’m so hungry!” she yelled, and both children jumped at the loud bark of her tone. “And here she sits all the day, doing nothing but dreaming! All her age have already gone! My parents died many years ago! Yet *she* keeps sitting at our table, opening her mouth for whatever food we have!”

Jost got up from the table. “She is my mother, wife. Pray that Matern treats you kindly when you are gray. Have pity; she’s worked her entire life and now she deserves her rest.” He put on his cloak and hat and brushed past her to go out the door. A shattering wind came in and swirled around us before the door shut.

For a moment I thought Jost’s words had shamed her. She stared down at the table. Then she got up to get a kitchen cloth, which she pressed to the wet board to soak up the soup, then put it in Matern’s mouth to suck. “You need to earn your keep, old woman,” she said in a tired voice. She reached across and cradled Alke’s cheek in her hand. Alke concentrated only on the thin sheen of soup on her spoon.

“Look at my hands,” I whispered. “Scarcely more useful than those buried in the graveyard, and with little more flesh on them. How can I put them to use?”

“By holding them out flat for alms. Beg for your meal, old woman. I’m through with feeding you.”

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I stared.

“That’s right, Güde. Get your garments on and beg from the village. Get these children some food!”

Alke now licked the bowl that had been spilled, her pink tongue darting down to the bottom to catch the halfway salty flavor. Matern stared at his mother solemnly, still suckling the cloth she had placed in his mouth.

I stood to go to my straw mattress in the corner and shun her wrath, but she put her hands on my shoulders and funneled me to the door. “Here then! Here’s your scarf, there, and there,” she said as she wrapped it around my head and neck. She thrust my cloak at me.

“You’re sending me out to beg?” I asked. Even though my voice had gotten reedy as I aged, I was surprised at the frail sound coming from me.

“Your mind is going along with your body,” said she. “Haven’t I said it clearly?”

She pushed me outside and I shivered instantly in the shock of cold. The sky was a large gray storm pressing down upon the treetops. I turned to press my hand to the door to stop her, but she was stronger and it closed.

I stared at the wood in disbelief.

I banged my palm against the door. “Irmeltrud,” I called. “Please let me in. It is freezing as night out here. It’s snowing.”

She made no reply.

“Please,” I cried. I curled both hands into fists and battered them against the door.

My fists stilled and I listened to the wind. Inside I heard Matern begin to wail. I hammered more, thinking of Hensel and his mallet plugging the logs of this cottage into place, decades ago. The same *thump, thump*. My husband had built this *Hütte*, and our own son’s wife had locked its door against me.

*They take the unguent, which, as we have said, they make at the devil's instruction from the limbs of children...whereupon they are immediately carried up into the air, either by day or by night, and either visibly or, if they wish, invisibly.*

—MALLEUS MALEFICARUM

I turned my back to the wind and saw Jost's footprints. Although it made my bones ache to climb the hill behind the granary, I did so to follow him. Those with candles were lighting them now, and the village was spread before me, beginning to glow, with the tavern lit brightest. I looked across Künne's cottage yard, where in the fading light I saw someone, far too short to be my Jost, milking her goat for her. I shivered and pulled the cloak tightly around me so that the garment was doubled across my front. I remembered a time when my girth was such that the stitches strained to keep me covered. How long was I to wander?

Had Hensel crested the hill, he'd never have recognized me. The man who'd known my skin better than I did, who'd taken such pleasure in the rut that I stopped in the snow now to think of it—he would have passed by me with only a nod. And now I could barely see my hands in front of me from the steadfastness of the snowfall. It was a storm and nothing an old woman should be out in. "Jost!" I cried into the wind. "I can no longer see where you've stepped!"

I could not bear the thought of the door fastened against me, so I descended the hill on the other side, the side that led to the forest.

As I walked, it began to trouble me that someone other than Jost was milking Künne's goat. I would milk for her sometimes, as she was old and stooping to sit upon the milking stool was hard work for her bones. But what other man would do that task for her? I was disturbed also at Irmeltrud's statement that the Töpfers thought her responsible for their hen's dry womb. Künne did not know such spells. She knew how to combine plants and other substances to help cure sicknesses—all but the plague, which no human seemingly could cure—but she surely did not know how to make an animal behave any other way than its nature dictated. And even if she had such knowledge, she would never apply it. The only type of person who could cast such a spell came with a very particular name, one that I hoped would never be spoken in the same sentence as Künne's.

*Hexe: witch.*

The friar had hinted strongly about *Hexen* but not used the word. The Sunday our priest first introduced us to him, everyone stared. We couldn't help ourselves. We had never seen such grandeur before. He wore a great black robe of such voluminous folds and length that it flowed down to the ground like a pitch-black alpine waterfall. Underneath, his tunic was so purely white that I thought he must have dressed in the very church itself, pulling the garment from a protective casket as he knelt before the altar, for it bore no signs of mud or wear.

"We have a new guest to our village," the priest had said. "This is Friar Johannes Fuchs. He is here to help us."

The friar then stood and took the priest's place at the pulpit. The robes so consumed his body that when he walked I saw no sign of legs moving beneath. He glided. I closed my eyes to remove the rapture of that magnificence. And when I opened them again, I struggled to look beyond the robes, to see the face of the man bold enough to wear such opulence. He was young and his chin bore no hair. His mouth was small, a mere smudge in his face, and he looked as if he had never known a day of lightness. But he was not thin; it shocked me that his cheeks were rounded as all of ours had been at times of plenty. He had shaved his pate, forming a circlet of hair like Christ's crown of thorns.

"I come from a monastery many days' journey away, founded by those who follow in Saint Dominic's footsteps," he announced. "You have no doubt heard of our large fortress surging to the sky, blessed by God and Rome."

I marveled at the booming voice that came from one so young. He was not afraid to rise and address us, all strangers.

"Here in your tiny burg of Tierkinddorf, the woods are thick on all sides. You are nestled snugly out of harm's way. But my city sits on the edge of a wide river and enemies sail to our banks, ready to steal our goods and all that we cherish. We have built a wall around our city to fortify it, and none may come or go without a gatekeeper's consent. We could not imagine the liberty you have to wander your fields without always looking behind you. You are truly blessed to be so insignificant and tiny."

*Did he wish now to live with us? I wondered. He wanted our freedom as well?*

"But there is one thing that you are not blessed with, and that is a profitable harvest. I received a piteous letter from your lord, summoning me. Lord Obermann told me of your seedless fields."

I looked at the back of Lord Obermann's head. He was seated in the front on a handsome carved chair, the only chair in the church. Even the priest sat on a rough bench, and most of us stood.

"Yours is not the only village that is suffering. All across this land, people are hungry. Even in my city, we are counting the cakes in the larder. And that is why I have set off on this miraculous journey, with Christ's hands governing me, to find out why the land is cursed. I am here to help you, people of Tierkinddorf."

I could not concentrate on anything after he said the word *cakes*. In his city, they still had cakes. We had not made sweets for years now. Not even for fests. Sweets required flour.

“There is a reason for every circumstance we face. A reason why the flower droops, why the clouds bloat and thin and drift away. An explanation for the dropping of a kettle, for the goodwill of your neighbor, for the five fingers upon each hand. And God alone knows these reasons,” he said. “I am seeking God’s counsel for why the fields do not bear grain. I am journeying our countryside so that he may guide me and usher me to understanding, and then, perhaps, to remedy.”

I felt a surge of relief within me, and judging by the respectful but obvious clamor his speech created, I was not the only one. He was going to find out why the harvest was withheld! Thank God, heaven! And more than that, he would fix the problem! He was better than prayer, better than sacrifice. He was an actual man, gliding across our snow-covered hamlets, doing the work of God.

“What is God’s reason for punishing you? Why do you not have fullness upon your tables and fullness in your bellies? You are desperate to know why, and I am here to move the questions from your tongue to Christ’s ear. We of the Holy Roman Church believe that just as God punished the world with flood, he is now punishing you with famine. If we can discover the particular people who cause all this to be blamed, you can again gain God’s mercy.”

Women and men made the sign of the cross and then kissed their clasped hands in pure joy. I felt my stomach shift within my body, as if my very organs were calling out to the friar for help to fix them.

“And so, neighbors, maybe you already know whom God is angry with, but you have not been able to think the thought. But I urge you to give in to it. It is of no advantage to protect those who make your children cry with hunger. Pay attention to those around you. I am here now. You may seek me out to whisper into my ear.”

I was so happy, my fingers clenched in my lap. I knew he would find no one in this village whom God wanted to punish, but surely he would move on and find the true offender in another village. He would rearrange our lives back to the way they had been. He was a good man. *Thank you, thank you, God!* I mouthed.

“And now then, let us hold the mass,” he concluded.

The priest continued sitting in the background as the man in black and white led us through the call and responses, as he poured the tiny measure of Christ’s blood into the goblet, as he held aloft the small loaf that we would all nick with our teeth for a crumb.

Yes, we all suffered from hunger in our homes, but the church had reserved bread so that we might still hold communion and call Christ into our bodies.

As I knelt before the long robes and sipped from the goblet and bit at the rock-hard loaf, I felt an infusion of blessing. It was like a wedding day, or the first day of true warmth after a long winter. The friar was like an altar carving come to life, one of the old saints surging forward with Christ’s power in his gait and a Christian fire in his eyes. I could have kissed his robes, lifted the hem to my lips and inhaled the dust and incense that clung to it. I didn’t, though. I returned to stand with my family, robes and uplifted.

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As the brightness of the friar's robes faded in my mind, I could not feel my feet. It was dark now, and the snow was a layer upon me—I carried its weight as well as my own. I stopped walking and listened. I heard no other stepping in the wood, saw no sign of Jost or anyone else. I was utterly alone. And then I felt a tingling at each knob of my back: the fear of the woods.

All my life I'd heard tell of the beasts that skulked in the forest after nightfall. A man who by day gathered kindling would by night crouch down until his fingertips scratched the dirt. His jaw would lengthen and the sinews of his arms and legs would knot and twist. His body would hair itself coarsely. Lifting his face, he'd stare at the tops of the pines until claws dug into the ground beneath him and a tail sprouted from him, and he'd open his mouth to sing the howl that curdled the soul, that made lovers turn in bed and touch each other's faces to confirm the smoothness. Owls would lul their cry too, in tandem with the wolf, calling out to all creatures that death was only a bound and a bite away.

Into this wood I plunged, witless. I began singing a tune to keep me moving. "I Must Go Walk the Wood" was its name, and 'twas a song of love and forlorn wandering:

*Thus am I banished from my bliss*

*By craft and false pretense,*

*Faultless, without offense,*

*As of return, nothing certain is,*

*And all for fear of one.*

I sang it with a ragged laugh, and after "and all for fear of one" I could remember no more. Some days my mind was like a sprawling tatter of twigs left behind by a summer bird. *Evergreen tree evergreen tree...My bed shall be under the evergreen tree!* Wasn't that the way the song continued? I suppose I sang partly for Jost to hear, would that he might. Otherwise, I would walk to the crisp yawning of the owl until snow or wolf brought me down. The snow diminished, became little drifting thoughts about my head. I had been here too many years. The only one my age was Künne. All else gone. Always sleeping with their name scratched in wood above them. A moon lent some light, what little it could. It would pass me through the disapproving shadows of the trees. I wondered if Hensel watched my movements from above. Did he wish anything to do with me now? I was no winsome lass. My breath clouded the

air in front of me and I stopped finally, flesh cold as any a butcher put to ice. I had not kept track of my path. I did not know which way home might be, or if the door would even be opened to me if I could find my way back.

Perhaps the friar could bring harvest back to our fields, but I was lost and in darkness. How could I benefit from his work? I did not expect to leave the forest. "Hensel, I will join you this night," I said, sinking to my knees in the snow. "The door of the house you built is barred to me. Our son is abroad wandering, with no ken that I do the same. And she who hunches by the fire...Oh, Hensel, you see what she has wrought!"

And then a voice spake into my ear: "By craft and false pretense!"

I whirled around with my hand clutching my throat.

No one was there.

I lunged to my feet and heaved myself through the trees, running as fast as I could.

Above me, as if spoken from a high bough, came the voice again: "As of return, nothing certain is to be had. I turned and ran the other way. I feared to look up to see her, for it was certainly a woman, and only a woman willed myself God's speed. Suddenly the snow felt like a kitchenful of women pressing their knife tips into my skin. Above me, she whistled the song. She was keeping pace. What creature was she? She used the air as verily as earth, and soundlessly. "Jost!" I screamed. And then, because I was confused, "Hensel!"

She laughed at that, a sound so evil that I stopped myself, as one transfixed, to hear it. She used her wickedness to draw my eyes up, up, until I saw she dangled in the air, her dark, uncovered hair coiling and uncoiling around her head in the wind.

"We will feed you," she said. On her forehead was an impurity above her left eyebrow. She carried the mark of the devil, a kiss from fetid lips that stained her skin red.

I took one step backward, and then a second, and then her hand was on my shoulder and she was behind me, turning me to face her. Oh, the heavy iron weight and iciness of that hand! It froze down through my cloak and into the very chambers of my heart.

I stared into her wicked face. She was comely and her lips full and lush, yet I could not admire what Satan had kissed. Her eyes shone with unholy interest in me, and my spine hunched further to lower me from her gaze. This horror traveled the air! She stepped upon mere wind! I tried to run, but she held me in thrall. And then I saw that I knew her. She was from a different village and I had seen her at Michaelmas, as all the townships gathered to share our feast.

"Old Güde," said she, "the famine ends here in the forest. I trust you are ready."

She showed me her palm, crusted with blood. With a cry, I pulled it to my mouth and tasted animal blood. Meat. With that taste in my mouth, I no longer wished to run from her.



“Come and eat,” she said.

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I followed her into a clearing where six women scratched designs in the snow with their fingers bent intent on that purpose. I did not understand the chanting. All I saw was the fire and the pig on the spit above it.

They ceased their movements, fingers dangling, eyes hooded, and watched me approach.

“Do you give yourself to him?” she asked.

I faltered. The smell of the pig was strong. I knew its skin was crispy with hot fat. I knew the succulence would drench my fingers.

“Old Güde,” said one of the women, “it is only a simple agreement. To sign the devil’s book and then to eat.”

I walked closer to the fire. I was surrounded by crows and the women all gone.

“Faultless, without offense,” sang the air.

Behind the glow of the fire, I saw him. The cloven hooves to match those on the spit. The unearthly sound as he walked to me in the snow. He had a strong body, haired like an animal, and held a book. *God has forsaken me*, I thought. For he had the face of Hensel, my husband of years past, the most gentle being I had ever known. This beast had his eyes, the ones that rollicked me into bed and through and into his hands.

“Güde,” he said, and his voice too was Hensel’s, hushed. “I cannot bear to see you starve.”

My lips parted and tears came to my eyes. Sweet Hensel! No matter that he came to me amidst a manner of depravity, with cloven hoofs and women in a circle becoming jet-black birds. It was he, my one true love.

He never let go of the book, but somehow both hands were caressing me, pushing off the hood stroke my hair. I threw my head back, careless as a girl, to feel those hands again. I pressed against him—madness, and devilment; surely it was a trick.

“I love you still,” he said.

And although I could not see them behind me, I knew all the crows nodded and looked at each other sideways, cocking their heads to position their eyes.

He pressed hard against me, and I jumped to the side instantly, eyes wide. It was true what the tale told. The devil has an ice-cold prick. I felt it even through all the layers of wool I wore. I fell to the ground and sobbed, staring at his cloven feet. This wasn’t Hensel after all! I sank into the snow deeper and deeper, until I felt it would completely swallow me. My hands shifted in the snow to push me back up, but it was as if I pressed them against well water.

A crow walked to me, black claws carefully treading in the snow. It was the woman from the air from Michaelmas. She lifted one wing, as large as my arm, and used her beak to pry loose a feather. She offered it to me. A pool of blood appeared in the snow.

Suddenly I was sitting up and the book was in my lap. The snow was solid beneath me.

“Sign and you may sup,” said Hensel.

I was at eye level with the pig on the spit. It stared at me wildly. I could sense nothing now but the agonizing aroma of its crackling fat. And then I felt as if I tipped backward, but it wasn't me, it was the pig, spinning on his spit. Both of us rolled our eyes. The forest flickered, completely black for a moment and then lit by the fire again.

In despair, I dipped the quill in the pool of blood. He pushed a kiss into my mouth. With the wings, the crows stroked me. The pages of the book fluttered impatiently. A drop of blood landed on the page.

“She's as good as signed,” said Hensel, and I realized anew who these creatures of the forest were.

“No,” I shouted. “I know how to write my name, and I have not signed!”

Yet, as I stared down, the blot lengthened and thinned. Soon it was a *G*. And then the *ü*, and the *d*. It was spelling out my name.

“No!” I shouted, and slammed the book closed.

Everything vanished. It was pure darkness without the pig's fire. I held my breath and listened but no one moved in the dark. I was profoundly alone. Then I saw a basket in front of me, loaded with meat. I stood up. I was unsure if I had signed or not. “Hensel,” I whispered to the forest. I knelt and dipped both hands and fed myself, keeping my mouth close to the basket, gorging as fast as I could. The meat was hot and filled with juice. I fed with frenzy, in disbelief of the taste that was so extreme and so *good*. I closed my eyes to better savor the fibers mashing between my teeth, threading into the spaces where teeth used to be. The meat was so succulent, it was as if I could drink it; grease filmed my lips.

I cared not what the book said.

It was not as real as the taste of pig in my mouth.

---

I had been wrong thinking that my life would end that night, by design of wind or beast. I walked hardly a child's tread before I emerged back into the meadow. I climbed again the hill, saw the

drowning lights of my village, and descended to my home.

---

The door was open a crack and Jost ran to me in alarm when I pushed it further.

“Mutter! You’re frozen to the core!” He dragged me to the fire and saw for the first time my basket. “Drop that,” he commanded, and rubbed my hands to warm them. I looked across the room and saw that everyone was in bed. Irmeltrud had her back to me although I believed she was yet awake.

“You can eat of it, Jost,” I said. “I kept some for you.”

I smiled and pointed to the basket.

His face had the expression I’ve seen only in the last few years—the one that says I’ve seen something odd, or called Matern by Jost’s name or forgotten my own.

“’Twill spark the fire a moment only,” he said. “But I cannot eat of it.”

It was a decayed bit of basketry, splotted with weather and missing several reeds.

There was no meat in it.

---

*It is useless to argue that any result of witchcraft may be a phantasy and unreal, because such a phantasy cannot be procured without resort to the power of the devil.*

—MALLEUS MALEFICARUM

Jost unwound the scarf from my head, spreading it to dry. Then he fetched my blanket from my straw pallet and put it over my shoulders. As my shivering ceased, I became aware of a new smell. Although Jost's departure had brought disaster for me, it had brought a filling dinner for the family. Walking his traps, he had found a rabbit, which Irmeltrud stewed. Only a bit remained for me, and Jost ladled it into the bowl that earlier had held only carrot broth.

"It was such a sight, Mutter," said he. "A pure white rabbit I never would have seen against the snow, but for one black stripe against its pelt as if a fire had scorched it. It was passing strange."

"He tastes well enough," I said, my fingers pushing the soft flesh off the bone. His previous bones, sucked and cleaned, were piled on the hearth.

A rare smile lit Jost's face. "Alke is tanning it for a wrap. It will fit around her neck." He pointed to the pelt hanging from the rafter, salt rubbed into its nether side. The pelt was lovely, even with the ghostly holes where the bright eyes had been. The rabbit had a host of soft bristles in a measure, while a lesser-nourished creature might have had scant. It would toast Alke's neck through the coldest of winds.

"Thank you for your flesh, beast of the wood," I said. I made the ancient sign of the meat blessing with four fingers downcast to mirror the legs of the still-living beast, and then upturned them to show the felling, and finally pressed them to my lips to prove I honored the eating. I then made the sign of the cross. I put the final bone into my mouth and pursed my lips around it, like Hensel with his pipe yore. Then I placed it with the others in the cock.

Jost spake in a whisper. "Why did you go out in such weather, Mutter?"

I looked into his kind face, where I saw evidence of my own gray eyes and cheekbones. "She said she chose it?"

"I searched for you," he said. "I called and called your name. There were no footprints in the snow."

"Jost, I did not choose it!" I knew full well the tale that had been told. Old Güde, who has no mind anymore, who forgets her own name, had flung herself into the storm. *We tried to stop her, but she would listen to naught*, Irmeltrud likely had told him.

~~“I’m no fool to cast myself away from the warmth of the hearth in the dark of night. The snow was falling fast! I could not see my hand though it be a spoon’s length from my face! Do you think I wished this? She pushed me out.”~~

He blinked. Then Jost lowered his voice even further. “You are getting older, Mutter. Sometimes the things you do seem...out of sense.”

I whispered my next words also, for I saw that Irmeltrud’s back was too rigid for her mind to be relaxed and dreaming. “Have you not seen the hatred in her, Jost? I have been kindly to her all these years, and yet she hates me. She cast me out and then barred the door. I pounded and cried such that Matern cried out as well, but her heart was a thorn!”

He looked at the basket I had brought home with me.

“Jost!” I hissed. “Do not judge me by that folly.”

“You said it had meat in it and it had none.”

“Ask the children about her barring the door! The door that Hensel made!” I stood up in a fury and moved to the bed where Irmeltrud and the children lay.

“Mutter! Thank God you are back!” Irmeltrud sat up and encased me in a hug so seemingly true that I was confused. “Have you known how many hours Jost plogged the wood for you? We went to bed sore affrighted.” She pressed a fervent kiss upon my cheek and I struggled not to wrap my arms about her, I was so needy for such a touch. “Alke! Matern!” I said their names loudly to rouse them. Blushed with sleep they were, and glad for me. Alke buried her face into my chest while Matern snaked her arm to my waist.

“Großmutter, I dreamed you were back, and you are!” said Matern.

“Tell your father in what manner I left,” I commanded.

“Mutter asked you to get food,” said the boy. “And we waited and waited for you to come, but it was Vater who came with the rabbit.”

“Tell him how I pounded at the door to be let in, how I did not wish to go. She kept the door closed to me,” I said.

Irmeltrud gasped and her blue, blue eyes opened wide. “Oh, Mutter! Mutter...Jost, surely you know I have no heartless way like this! Güde was pounding at the door but as a game for the children. They rapped back and laughed, and she laughed too!”

“If cries be laughter, then betides the bee will kiss us next spring rather than sting,” I said bitterly.

“Großmutter, were you not playing?” asked Alke.

“No! She asked me to get food, Matern said. Would a daughter-in-law ask that of such a time-trie

old woman? At that hour? She cast me out!” I cried.

---

Above Alke’s golden head, Irmeltrud exchanged a look with Jost. I felt like a child; I held no swag. She had convinced the children it was a playful jest as I begged for my life on the cold side of the door. And now Jost was persuaded too. Any protestation would only mire me further. “I want to sleep now,” I said, pushing Alke and Matern from me. I rose, tired past belief suddenly, my body remembering the ordeal it had been through. I accepted a kiss from Jost without looking at him. I trundled to my cold straw and curled up on it.

I looked across the room with its solitary table and benches at the remains of the fire. In the corner of my vision I saw the shadow of Jost as he pulled back the bedclothes and moved his big body into them. I prayed he would not rut with Irmeltrud this night; I could not bear the sounds of that further betrayal.

From the height of the rafter, the little rabbit stared down at me through the blank holes of its pen. One solid black stripe where the devil raked his finger.

---

The next morn when Jost opened the door, a cloud of snow fell into the room. He had to dig for nearly an hour to free the door of its wall of snow. Then he set out again, whistling, to see what else might have wedged a paw in his traps.

We had nothing for breakfast but water, and Irmeltrud and the children left to gather branches for our fire, moving outside through the tunnel Jost had prepared. As I closed the door behind them, I saw the rich fold of whiteness that blanketed everything, white as ever Mary’s soul was. I sat by the fire mending Alke’s nightgown. Irmeltrud had already threaded the needle for my shaky hands with a piece of thread unraveled from a burned pot cloth. The room seemed very dim compared with the brilliance outside. The needle flashed its own small light, yet I had to bring the gown close to my face to see my uneven stitches. Alke tended to toss in her sleeping, and the weight of her own hip had wrenched the fabric. I heard a scratching at the door and straightened a bit to listen. ’Twas a small sound. It came again and I rose to open the door. A cat was there, its paw still raised in the motion of grinding its claws against our wood.

“Feh! Shoo!” I shouted, and slammed the door.

It wasn’t a black cat, which the Pope had warned against, but any cat is known to be trafficking with the powers of evil. I made the sign of the cross, accidentally dragging the sharp needle along my forehead as I did so. I cried out in pain, and brought my other hand up to the wound. My fingers came back red. At the fire, I pressed the burned pot cloth to my head. It made no difference if it was spoiled. The cat scratched again.

And again.

And again.

---

Then the thick wool that covered the window moved. The beast was batting the cloth from the other side, sitting on the small sill. "Pursue me not," I whispered, dropping the needle and pot cloth. I watched one paw make its way through. The cat clawed at the edge of the wool until it was able to push it to the side and stare in at me. A gust of cold wind came with it.

It was a gray tabby, with stripes like the shadows trees throw on the ground. Its eyes were green, I could tell even from across the room. Its mouth opened and it gave a distant meow, its tiny, sharp teeth grimacing at me.

"I did not sign," I said. "And if the book signed for me, I am not beholden to it."

The cat sat down on its back legs, its shoulder still pressing the window cloth to the side. My heart was pounding. I made the sign of the cross again, and then, beginning to feel the sweat pressing out across my body, walked to pick up the broom from the corner. I was terrified the beast would leave the sill and leap into the room. But did I have the daring to swat it with the broom, to push it backward into the snow?

"Be gone, you devil!" I said.

I took two steps forward, the broom braced in front of me. So close now to the animal, I saw that its eyes were golden-flecked, and that a black slit ran up them vertically. Like the stripe on the rabbit pelt. Whose eyes were these?

Our eyes fixed. The slits in the cat's widened until there were two black pools in the middle of the green. 'Twas a transformation. It took the evil from the cat and made it the soft thing women kept in their laps years ago, gamboling after thread. Once these were not hated but loved. They spoke the mewls sweetly and drank the stream that issued from the cow, sitting there by the bucket, milk dripping from their whiskers. And making all laugh from the furiousness of the pounce on a poor mouse. Of course, in the granary we had to have cats to keep down the rats. But Künne's family had had one that would come into the house, to sit by the fire with the family; this was how I knew the feel of the fur. They even named it, calling it Flüstern, since its soft step in the cottage was like a secret whisper between hushed voices.

The cat stayed on the sill until my eyes went blind from the blaze of white behind it.

"Is your fur soft?" I asked it.

The eyes remained round bowls for me, and it was this that caused my ease. "You are naught but a beast of the barn," I told it. "Go there now to warm yourself."

Its back haunches sat in the layer of snow left on our windowsill. As the animal rose again to standing, I heard the smush of snow pressing under its weight. It issued another meow, so like to the tender mewling of a babe that I repeated it in my own quaver.

The cat leaped down, brushing my skirts as it dashed inside. The window cloth flew back down  
cover the light from outside.

---

The cat knew just where to go and jumped onto the hearth. It curled its tail around its body and tucked it under its chin. The marvelous eyes closed. It would sleep, as slumberous as me in my straw

I sat on the edge of my chair and looked all along its length. Pleasing stripes, and the flesh padded firmly against the bones. This beast looked as though it ate better than Jost's family.

Leaning to pick up the needle, I ran my finger along it to rid it of its blood and then wiped my finger on the pot cloth. The cat dozed, no companion but for the rising of its skin with each breath. I picked up Alke's nightgown again to finish my task.

—

When I awoke, the shadows were different. Alke's gown had slid to the ground and I picked it up, snapping it in the air to rid it of dust. At this, the cat awoke. The eyes were once again slits, and it dragged in a quick breath of alarm.

It stood and pressed its back up to the ceiling, as coiled as the snake Eve had trusted. I stepped to the back of my chair, thinking to keep the wood between us.

Then the cat's body sank while the hind parts remained in air, and I saw this posture for what it was: a stretch upon waking. I had seen Jost do the same to prepare for a hard day grooving the millstones. The cat jumped down from the hearth and came to my skirts, stepping lightly. It pressed against my leg, making a buzzing sound like a muffled bee that instantly brought me back to Künne's cottage as a girl playing with Flüstern to get a purr. Without thinking, I crouched down and touched the cat's head between the ears.

I groaned in a faltering sort of joy and tears came to my eyes.

Not since Hensel died had I felt such a thing under my hands. Warmth, softness, *life*. Maternal. Alke gave swift hugs, but to linger with my hands reveling in such warmth...

Soon I was heaving with my weep, both hands passing over the cat's fur, plunging into the thick pelt at the neck and smoothing down across the ribs. Underneath, the belly pelt was the softest of all, and the cat cared not that my tears landed on it. My hands became clogged with its fur, for it came off with my pressuring, and I scattered the hairs on the ground, continuing the stroking that was bringing such pleasure to both of us. The cat began a sort of prance under my hands, with only its front paws dancing.

I leaned back a bit and looked at its motion. It stepped on, a single-minded look in its eye. I laughed in surprised amaze. "Why, 'tis like you're kneading your own bread," I said.



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