

ANGELA CARTER - The Werewolf

(included in *The Bloody Chamber*)

Is a northern country; they have cold weather, they have cold hearts.

Cold; tempest; wild beasts in the forest. It is a hard life. Their houses are built of logs, dark and smoky within. There will be a crude icon of the virgin behind a guttering candle, the leg of a pig hung up to cure, a string of drying mushrooms. A bed, a stool, a table. Harsh, brief, poor lives.

To these upland woodsmen, the Devil is as real as you or I. More so; they have not seen us nor even know that we exist, but the Devil they glimpse often in the graveyards, those bleak and touching townships of the dead where the graves are marked with portraits of the deceased in the naïf style and there are no flowers to put in front of them, no flowers grow there, so they put out small, votive offerings, little loaves, sometimes a cake that the bears come lumbering from the margins of the forest to snatch away. At midnight, especially on Walpurgisnacht, the Devil holds picnics in the graveyards and invites the witches; then they dig up fresh corpses, and eat them. Anyone will tell you that.

Wreaths of garlic on the doors keep out the vampires. A blue-eyed child born first on the night of St John's Eve will have second sight. When they discover a witch - some old woman whose cheeses ripen when her neighbours' do not, another old woman whose black cat, oh, sinister! *follows her about all the time*, they strip the crone, search for her marks, for the supernumerary nipple her familiar sucks. They soon find it. Then they stone her to death.

Winter and cold weather.

Go and visit grandmother, who has been sick. Take her the oatcakes I've baked for her on the hearthstone and a little pot of butter.

The good child does as her mother bids - five miles' trudge through the forest; do not leave the path because of the bears, the wild boar, the starving wolves. Here, take your father's hunting knife; you know how to use it.

The child had a scabby coat of sheepskin to keep out the cold, she knew the forest too well to fear it but she must always be on her guard. When she heard that freezing howl of a wolf, she dropped her gifts, seized her knife and turned on the beast.

It was a huge one, with red eyes and running, grizzled chops; any but a mountaineer's child would have died of fright at the sight of it. It went for her throat, as wolves do, but she made a great swipe at it with her father's knife and slashed off its right forepaw.

The wolf let out a gulp, almost a sob, when it saw what had happened to it; wolves are less brave than they seem. It went lolloping off disconsolately between the trees as well as it could on three legs, leaving a trail of blood behind it. The child wiped the blade of her knife clean on her apron, wrapped up the wolf's paw in the cloth in which her mother had packed the oatcakes and went on towards her grandmother's house. Soon it came on to snow so thickly that the path and any footsteps, track or spoor that might have been upon it were obscured.

She found her grandmother was so sick she had taken to her bed and fallen into a fretful sleep, moaning and shaking so that the child guessed she had a fever. She felt the forehead, it burned. She shook out the cloth from her basket, to use it to make the old woman a cold compress, and the wolf's paw fell to the floor.

But it was no longer a wolf's paw. It was a hand, chopped off at the wrist, a hand toughened with work and freckled with old age. There was a wedding ring on the third finger and a wart on the index finger. By the wart, she knew it for her grandmother's hand.

She pulled back the sheet but the old woman woke up, at that, and began to struggle, squawking and shrieking like a thing possessed. But the child was strong, and armed with her father's hunting knife; she managed to hold her grandmother down long enough to see the cause of her fever. There was a bloody stump where her right hand should have been, festering already.

The child crossed herself and cried out so loud the neighbours heard her and come rushing in. They knew the wart on the hand at once for a witch's nipple; they drove the old woman, in her shift as she was, out into the snow with sticks, beating her old carcass as far as the edge of the forest, and pelted her with stones until she fell down dead.

Now the child lived in her grandmother's house; she prospered.

Joyce Carol Oates

THE TEMPLE

There, again, the vexing, mysterious sound!-a faint mewing cry followed by a muffled scratching, as of something being raked by nails, or claws. At first the woman believed the sound must be coming from somewhere inside the house, a small animal, perhaps a squirrel, trapped in the attic beneath the eaves, or in a remote corner of the earthen-floored cellar; after she searched the house thoroughly, she had to conclude that it emanated from somewhere outside, at the bottom of the old garden, perhaps. It was far more distinct at certain times than at others, depending upon the direction and velocity of the wind.

How like a baby's cry, terribly distressing to hear! and the scratching, which came in spasmodic, desperate flurries, was yet more distressing, evoking an obscure horror.

The woman believed she'd first begun hearing the sound at the time of the spring thaw in late March, when melting ice dripped in a continuous arrhythmic delirium from chimneys, roofs, eaves, trees. With the coming of warm weather, her bedroom window open to the night, her sleep was increasingly disturbed.

She had no choice, then, did she? - she must trace the sound to its origin. She set about the task calmly enough one morning, stepping out into unexpectedly bright, warm sunshine, and making her way into the lush tangle of vegetation that had been her mother's garden of thirty years before. The mewing sound, the scratching-it seemed to be issuing from the very bottom of the garden, close by a stained concrete drainage ditch that marked the end of the property. As soon as she listened for it, however, it ceased.

How steady the woman's heartbeat, amid the quickening pulse of a May morning.

Out of the old garage, that had once been a stable, the woman got a shovel, a spade, a rake, these implements festooned in cobwebs and dust, and began to dig. It was awkward work and her soft hands ached after only minutes, so she returned to the garage to fetch gardening gloves-these too covered in cobwebs and dust, and stiffened with dirt. The mid-morning sun was ablaze so she located an old straw hat of her mother's: it fitted her head oddly, as if its band had been sweated through and dried, stiffened asymmetrically.

So she set again to work. First, she dug away sinewy weeds and vines, chicory, wild mustard, tall grasses, in the area out of which the cry had emanated; she managed to uncover the earth, which was rich with compost, very dark, moist. Almost beneath her feet, the plaintive mewing sounded! "Yes. Yes. I'm here," she whispered. She paused, very excited; she heard a brief flurry of scratching, then silence. "I'm here, now." She grunted as she pushed the shovel into the earth, urging it downward with her weight, her foot; it was a pity she'd so rarely used gardening implements, in all of her fifty years. She was a naturally graceful woman so out of her element here she felt ludicrous to herself, like a beast on its hind legs.

She dug. She spaded, and raked. She dug again, deepening and broadening the hole which was like a wound in the jungle-like vegetation. Chips and shards of aged brick, glass, stones were uncovered, striking the shovel. Beetles scurried away, their shells glinting darkly in the sunshine. Earthworms squirmed, some of them cut cruelly in two. For some time the woman worked in silence, hearing only her quickened heartbeat and a roaring pulse in her ears; then,

distinctly, with the impact of a shout, there came the pleading cry again, so close she nearly dropped the shovel.

At last, covered in sweat, her hands shaking, the woman struck something solid. She dropped to her knees and groped in the moist dark earth and lifted something round and hollow—a human skull? But it was small, hardly half the size of an adult's skull.

"My God!" the woman whispered.

Squatting then above the jagged hole, turning the skull in her fingers. How light it was! The color of parchment, badly stained from the soil. She brushed bits of damp earth away, marveling at the subtle contours of the cranium. Not a hair remained. The delicate bone was cracked in several places and its texture minutely scarified, like a ceramic glaze. A few of the teeth were missing, but most appeared to be intact, though caked with dirt. The perfectly formed jaws, the slope of the cheekbones! The empty eye sockets, so round... The woman lifted the skull to stare into the sockets as if staring into mirror-eyes, eyes of an eerie transparency. A kind of knowledge passed between her and these eyes yet she did not know: was this a child's skull? had a child been buried here, it must have been decades ago, on her family's property? Unnamed, unmarked? Unacknowledged? Unknown?

For several fevered hours the woman dug deeper into the earth. She was panting in the overhead sun, which seemed to penetrate the straw hat as if it were made of gauze; her sturdy body was clammy with sweat. She discovered a number of scattered bones—a slender forearm, curving ribs, part of a hand, fingers—these too parchment-colored, child-sized. What small, graceful fingers! How they had, scratched, clawed, for release! Following this morning, forever, the finger bones would be at peace.

By early afternoon, the woman gave up her digging. She could find no more of the skeleton than a dozen or so random bones.

She went up to the house, and returned quickly, eagerly, with a five-foot runner of antique velvet cloth, a deep wine color, in which to carry the skull and bones up to the house. For no one must see. No one must know. "I am here, I will always be here," the woman promised. "I will never abandon you." She climbed to the second floor of the house, and in her bedroom at the rear she lay the velvet runner on a table beside her bed and beneath a bay window through whose diamond-shaped, leaded panes a reverent light would fall. Tenderly, meticulously, the woman arranged the skull and bones into the shape of a human being. Though most of the skeleton was missing, it would never seem to the woman's loving eye that this was so.

In this way the woman's bedroom became a secret temple. On the velvet cloth the skull and bones, unnamed, would be discovered after the woman's death, but that was a long way off.

1996

JRR Tolkien

THE HOBBIT

In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort. It had a perfectly round door like a porthole, painted green, with a shiny yellow brass knob in the exact middle. The door opened on to a tube-shaped hall like a tunnel: a very comfortable tunnel without smoke, with panelled walls, and floors tiled and carpeted, provided with polished chairs, and lots and lots of pegs for hats and coats-- the hobbit was fond of visitors. The tunnel wound on and on, going fairly but not quite straight into the side of the hill-- The hill, as all the people for many miles round called it-- and many little round doors opened out of it, first on one side and then on another. No going upstairs for the hobbit: bedrooms, bathrooms, cellars, pantries (lots of these), wardrobes (he had whole rooms devoted to clothes), kitchens, dining-rooms, all were on the same floor, and indeed on the same passage. The best rooms were all on the left-hand side (going in), for these were the only ones to have windows, deep-set round windows looking over his garden, and meadows beyond, sloping down to the river.

[...]

Jane Austen

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Chapter 1

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

"My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

"But it is," returned she; "for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it."

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

"Do not you want to know who has taken it?" cried his wife impatiently.

"*You* want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it."

This was invitation enough.

"Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it, that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week."

"What is his name?"

"Bingley."

"Is he married or single?"

"Oh! single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!"

"How so? how can it affect them?"

"My dear Mr. Bennet," replied his wife, "how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them."

"Is that his design in settling here?"

"Design! nonsense, how can you talk so! But it is very likely that he *may* fall in love with one of them, and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes."

"I see no occasion for that. You and the girls may go, or you may send them by themselves, which perhaps will be still better, for as you are as handsome as any of them, Mr. Bingley might like you the best of the party."

"My dear, you flatter me. I certainly *have* had my share of beauty, but I do not pretend to be any thing extraordinary now. When a woman has five grown-up daughters she ought to give over thinking of her own beauty."

"In such cases a woman has not often much beauty to think of."

"But, my dear, you must indeed go and see Mr. Bingley when he comes into the neighbourhood."

"It is more than I engage for, I assure you."

"But consider your daughters. Only think what an establishment it would be for one of them. Sir William and Lady Lucas are determined to go, merely on that account, for in general, you know, they visit no new-comers. Indeed you must go, for it will be impossible for us to visit him if you do not."

"You are over-scrupulous surely. I dare say Mr. Bingley will be very glad to see you; and I will send a few lines by you to assure him of my hearty consent to his marrying whichever he chooses of the girls: though I must throw in a good word for my little Lizzy."

"I desire you will do no such thing. Lizzy is not a bit better than the others; and I am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good-humoured as Lydia. But you are always giving *her* the preference."

"They have none of them much to recommend them," replied he; "they are all silly and ignorant, like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters."

"Mr. Bennet, how can you abuse your own children in such a way! You take delight in vexing me. You have no compassion on my poor nerves."

"You mistake me, my dear. I have a high respect for your nerves. They are my old friends. I have heard you mention them with consideration these twenty years at least."

"Ah! you do not know what I suffer."

"But I hope you will get over it, and live to see many young men of four thousand a year come into the neighbourhood."

"It will be no use to us if twenty such should come, since you will not visit them."

"Depend upon it, my dear, that when there are twenty, I will visit them all."

Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three-and-twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. *Her* mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news.

END OF CHAPTER 1