

When the devil came the first time he tricked the old man into selling me for all the riches of the world. I was behind the house, pulling out the weeds in the old man's garden while he had gone on his usual wandering-the-hills-in-search-of-my-lost-step-brother expedition and met the devil in the process. The devil had told him that if he gave the most precious thing that was behind the house, the old man would gain all the riches of the world for it. The old man agreed, thinking that only his rotten garden was behind there.

I finished the garden and rounded the corner of the house just as he emerged from the trees. The old man had been beaming from ear to ear so pleased to have made such a good deal that would help feed his family.

However, when he caught sight of me, that expression of happiness contorted into a strangled look of horror. He stumbled back, his gaze traveling rapidly from the house to myself.

"You stupid girl!" the old man suddenly roared and came at me as though he was going to beat me.

I fled into that house just as mother came out and screamed at him to restrain himself. I didn't wait around to hear or see the outcome of that conversation and hurried up the stairs, dashing into my room and locking the door. I didn't dare go down to make dinner later that day as I could still hear their bickering late into the night, eventually falling asleep with an empty stomach.

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The next day I bathed and changed and went down to draw water from the well near my house. It was Sunday, church day. However neither the old man nor mother seemed to be up yet, which was highly unusual for such diligent church-goers.

I went about my chores as per normal and around midday, began to make the midday meal, expecting them down any minute. However the minutes turn to hours and still they did not come down from their bedroom.

Just as I set the food on the table, in strolled mother and the old man. They were dressed in Sunday's best and seemed rather pleased with themselves. They took off their coats and mother came to my side and held me, one arm slung across my back, her hand cupping my shoulder and squeezing it gently.

"We have great news for you, my daughter" Mother said, smiling prettily at me, her large almond-shaped blue eyes glittering with delight.

"Yes mother, what would that be?" I asked nervously, walking out of her embrace to set the table for the meal.

Mother swept her beautiful long hair over her shoulder as if to say 'no matter', then smiled smugly at me.

I was becoming very suspicious as to why they had gone to church without me. In all my sixteen years I had never *once* been left behind.

The old man undid his collar button and loosened his t-shirt as he sat down at the table. He looked up at me and winked, making my skin crawl. There was something not right about the two of them that afternoon and I was starting to dread finding out why.

Suddenly my mother clapped her hands together, as if she could keep the secret contained no longer.

"Darling, you are to be married! In fact, your husband is waiting outside for you right this minute. Why don't you go and see?" My mother said, placing a hand on my shoulder and steering me around the table and towards the front door.

There, standing in a man's suit, stood the devil. He was red-faced, large-boned and fierce-looking. Long-black tipped ears poking out from underneath black locks of hair which fell like a river of tar and curses around his face and down his back. He leaned on a silver-handled cane leisurely as he took a good look at me.

"I see. Here be the virgin bride. Come, you are mine for the taking now" The devil smiled. He held out a hand, expecting me to walk into his arms like some idiot.

I looked at my mother and she smiled prettily at me, making my blood run cold. She wanted me to do this; walk into the arms of a devil *willingly*. It was written behind her smile: "Go and die love, so that *I* can have all the riches of this world" without a single drop of regret.

The more I gazed upon that smile, the more it reminded me of the other woman my mother was. Not the vain selfish one who drank in her own beauty or the sweet and kind woman who complimented the food I made and how clean I kept the oven and the fireplace. The evil one, who killed my step-brother and buried him under a juniper tree.

"Child, come! I haven't all day dearie" the devil said, smiling as though patronizing me

"Why do you glare at your mother so? Come here. We have far to go and I'd like to get a good look at you before we set off on our journey" he grinned.

I shook off my mother's touch and stood away from them.

In a different tongue which only my mother and I understood as it was the language of our old land, I turned to my mother and asked, "What big eyes you have mother! Where did you see this grand suitor of mine that you have procured for your daughter?" all the while ignoring the devil.

"At the Church's Cemetery my dear, this morning!" She replied, her smile broadening.

"What big ears you have mother! When did you see him coming here to our humble cottage? I heard neither a carriage nor a horse's hoof beat and yet here he stands. Did he walked the six miles through the forest to our cottage?" I asked again, my fears rising. This form of speaking seemed unnecessary, but it was an old game of *Mr. Wolf* that my mother had always liked to play with me when she was keeping secrets from me. If I could ask her three questions just like little red riding hood did, my mother would humor me and answer each one as a clue to piece together the secret.

"Well some people are just not like other humans my dear, they are so rich, they have other special means of travel" She grinned, her eyes turning slit like. There was nothing beautiful about my mother.

"What pretty teeth you have *mother*. How much of the truth have you eaten? What did you really go to the cemetery for? " I asked, seething.

" I went there to get the ashes of a dead man to purify the cottage. In the process I met this dashing young gentleman there. Besides it was your step-father who met the lad in the forest yesterday. In return for your hand this lovely boy has promised us all the *riches in the world!* And of course your step-father said yes! Who could blame him?" mother shrugged, her eyes twinkling in the sunlight.

"Whatever was behind the house..." I said to myself. Then I remembered the scene again. The old man coming home, beaming... Me emerging from behind the house... The old man turning to me, horrified... My mother intervening... The visit to the cemetery...

I felt pure horror and anger cut through me, but then a small pocket of guilt unfolded within me. I looked at my hands and for a moment, saw the blood of my brother on them. I thought to myself, if this is who I am, a murderer like my mother, then maybe I do deserve to die. Maybe I should take the devil's hand and bear whatever punishment is dealt to me.

However with that pocket of guilt uncurled the memory of my other parent, my real father. Memories of him suddenly rushed back to me; his glasses perched on the edge of his nose as he looked down at me as I babbled about

something unimportant. He had been smiling. I remembered him throwing me in the air, then holding me close and kissing my cheeks. I remembered long quarrels with my mother, after which he'd come to my room and pick me up and hold me tight. At times like that he'd tell me to be strong and to remember that no matter how awful things could get, as long as I believed, things could get better.

It was my real father's voice that had warmed my heart when I had been scrubbing the kitchen floor late at night in the chill of winter's frost, forced to do it by a seething mother. It was his voice now that gave me the courage, to say the things that needed to be said. For my father and I, we shared the same hair, the same eyes, as well as the same heart.

I looked up at mother and glared " No mother, this has your hand prints all over this. You planned this from the very beginning. You made the pack with the devil but have pinned it on the old man to free yourself from suspicious. You gathered ash from a dead man not to cleanse, but to allow the devil to walk right in. You are killing me to get yourself a horde of cash. Have you no shame woman? You would exchange a human soul for temporary satisfaction?"

"You do NOT talk to your mother like that young lady! Now go! Your destiny awaits you!" My mother bellowed and pushed me towards the devil.

I wanted to retract but something yanked me towards the devil and I stumbled forward, heading into the devil's arms.

Just as the devil's hand was about to close around my shoulder, he jumped back and hissed.

"This girl is too clean. She radiates the purity of a blessed child. I cannot take her as she is. Let her not bath for the rest of the day and I will come for her the same time at noon tomorrow" The devil snapped and turned on his hoofed-feet, disappearing as quickly as he came to be.

I turned to glare at my mother but before I knew what hit me, I was out cold.

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I awoke in a dark room. It smelled like socks and coats and I immediately knew I had been locked inside of the coat-cupboard.

I thought of my life up to then. I thought of frustration and loss of being away from my homeland. The hours of toiling and working in the cottage so that my parents could relax and sleep the day away. Then I thought of the anger and frustration in Mother's eyes that I never could understand. Her restless nature seemed to constantly be searching for some fulfillment, some answer to a problem she had that was too great for me to understand. It was the instances that I caught where she'd suddenly look so horror stricken, that made me really work extra hard, to try and relieve some of the invisible burden that she carried, from the old country, all the way across the lands and seas we had traveled in the care of the old man, to the cottage we now lived in.

Then finally, when I could not put it off any longer, I thought of Guniper.

Guniper's eyes had been kind brown eyes, which reflected his even kinder heart. He had been the reason that old man smiled for with every step Guniper took his poor dead Mother, who had died in childbirth, walked with him. The old man had loved Guniper far more than he had loved Mother, and mother couldn't stand it.

Guniper's hair had been as black as midnight, as black as opals. His eyes a deep sea-blue which reflected the old town his mother had been raised in before she and the old man had moved to a quiet cottage in the woods to have their first child. His features were delicate and sweet, just like his mother's, although he had at the time of his death, which had been at the age of sixteen, grown into a strong slender young man.

His smile was radiant and peaceful whenever I thought about that last afternoon. I had gone to the kitchen to get him an apple to eat. Guniper had been leaning against a wall casually, reading a book. He was so quick and intelligent that he had discovered new ways to efficiently help the old man with his farming business without any prior business or engineering training. He had been planning to go to town that afternoon to make the first purchases to make a proper hand-held plow for his father and himself to work with.

Mother had come in, looking the splitting image of one of those perfect homemakers; apron on and a tray of cookies in one hand, a large rosy smile on her face. I should have been there. If I had, I would have immediately recognized that smile for what it was. It was the smile she had worn when I had watched her strangle a dog that had bitten her on the way to the old man's land when we were traveling away from our old land. It was the smile I remembered seeing just as I remember glimpsing her throw a chair at the reclining figure of my real father as he slept on the sofa in a dark house a long time before the old man had ever appeared in our lives.

When I came back with the apple, my mother had been holding Guniper's head by the hair, and it was not connected to his body. She glanced at me as she stuffed his head in a sack and dragged the sack and the limp headless body out of the house, grunting with the exertion as she dragged the corpse towards the woods.

I had trailed behind her and watched nervously as she pulled out from behind a tree a shovel and began digging. Once she was satisfied, she dumped the head first, then the body, and grunted at me to help her. I picked up soil with my hands and tossed it into the hole, quietly crying as I watched the lumps heap up on top of my brother's body.

When we returned to the house, I had been expecting to see the old man, who I had still called father at that time, standing in the door way staring at us like we were murderers. Later when I was older, I heard that my mother had actually convinced him to go on a week's journey into the city to get something for Guniper. She had acted as though she was very supportive of Guniper's education, which of course removed all suspicion that she had anything against him.

So while the old man was happily buying a book for his son, we were scrubbing his son's blood off the floor boards, the windows, the walls and the curtains. By the time the old man returned, the crime scene was clean and restored to its original appearance. The old man immediately believed the words of my old mother witch, and went in search of a boy, who could never be found.

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My stomach growled and I huddled into myself, hoping my torment would be over soon.

At some point I feel asleep again. I was yanked to my feet and dragged out of the house after several hours, my mother dragging me out of the cupboard quickly, so that I stumbled, blurry-eyed and weak with hunger into the sunlight, wiping dust and eye-muck from my eyes, without any chance to protest or escape. This time the old man stood there as well, looking at me as one would look at a prize pig.

"She's good with her hands too. Her bread is the best I've tasted, of course second only to my wife's" He babbled.

"Old man, you're talking to the devil!" I shouted, unable to control my wrath.

"Quiet child, don't called Sir that. It is very impolite" He said pleasantly, un-phased by my outburst.

"Well, come forth my dear" the devil said, crooking a finger in my direction.

I shook off my mother's grip and walked towards him, intending to spit on his face, if it was the last thing I'd do.

However as I walked the distance from my mother to my tormentor tears fell from my eyes uncontrollably, leaving streaks through the dirt and grime that had built up from being in the dusty closet for hours. I wiped the dirt away, and as I did, the devil practically jumped out of his skin!

“This is preposterous! This girl cannot be tainted! Chop off her hands! Or else I will chop you both to pieces!” The devil shouted at the old man, who looked at me and mother in bewilderment, and then back at the devil.

The devil spun on his hooved feet again as before and disappeared.

The old man for the first time seemed to see me. He looked in horror at the place where the devil had been, then looked in horror at his wife.

“What have I done? What should I do? Shall we go to the church? Perhaps they could help-“

“Help a murderer?” Mother said breezily, letting the word hang in the air.

“Murderer?” My father repeated, practically choking on the word.

“Why of course, I have been trying to protect her up till now, as mothers do for their children, but I believe it’s time you know; this tart murdered Guniper. So sought after to be the only child of your affections, she took an axe and cut off his head! What is cutting off her arms, to cutting off Guniper’s head?” Mother grinned, looking at me deviously.

I stared in shock at her. I couldn’t believe it. I just couldn’t believe it. It was all too horrific. Up till now, I hadn’t grasped the true horror of the situation, but it was slowly dawning on me; when my mother’s smile was turned on someone, that person rarely stayed alive thereafter. Now that smile was on me.

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What happened next was like a blur. Mother held me tightly and whispered how much she was going to enjoy this, but I couldn’t hear her for the roaring of my crazed heart beat, the blood rushing to my ears.

Then the old man came at me. My arm was laid out on a wood stump. Then it lay on the ground, a lifeless limb. Then the other was stretched out on the wood stump. My mind was as blank as a piece of paper. There on the wooden stump, was a long slender arm, then it was there no more.

My Mother tossed me aside afterwards like a gutted pig and took the axe out of the old man’s hands, taking it to the river to wash it herself. The old man stared at me as though he could not believe what he was seeing, as I lay there

on the ground bleeding to death. Then he turned his back for a moment blocking out the light of the sun, then lumbered back into the house, a soulless man, wandering in his own darkness.

They left me there to bleed to death. I tried to roll myself away but the pain in my arms was excruciating and many a time I would black out and then return, only to faint again when it got too unbearable. The wolves howled close by but the ashes mother had sprinkled warded them away; even they knew not to venture where the devil is welcome.

Then came the dawn and with it mother, kicking me about, making me hobble and sit on the bloody wood stump as she rubbed ash into my bloody limbs and cleaned up what she could in an attempt to make me more presentable. Then she stopped and laughed a cruel laugh.

“Well the blood looks good on you; it compliments your new husband’s complexion” she sneered and spun around on her slender feet, sashaying back into the house.

If there was anything I had learnt from stories my mother had told me when I was younger, stories about how to meet devils, and how to get out of traps, which now I realize must have been real instructions from old witchery that she had learnt long ago, everything comes in threes. Thus if the bargain is not settled by the third account, I might just have a chance to go free.

I tried to look for anything I could use to clean myself once more, however not even the water for the pigs was left outside and the sky looked to be a clear day with no sign of rain.

I hung my head. Was there no salvation for me? Not even from the heavens?

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Once again, at noon, there came the devil. He looked approvingly at me as I sat on the wood stump, unable to do anything for myself. He turned and nodded at mother in agreement to their bargain.

“Consider it settled” he grinned as he took a step towards me.

Just then, a rain drop landed in the middle of my forehead. I turned my head up and smiled as a whole shower of rain followed, beating down on all of us, washing the ash from my wounds, washing the blood from my face and neck, washing the dirt from my skin.

Mother howled in rage, and made to dive for me, maybe to slam me into the mud and roll me about in it, however the devil waved her off.

“She has been damaged, she still can be taken” the devil grinned.

Hope froze like ice in my chest and for a moment, I could no breath. Was the world not through with torturing me enough? To rain down on my hope, then to kill it because the hope itself is too late?

“Not if I have anything to say about it” a voice suddenly said from the forest.

We all turned to see a tall man standing at the edge of the forest. His eyes were as blue as the sea, and his hair as brown as the deepest wood bark, his skin sapling green. He looked strange, inhuman, and yet very familiar.

“Who are you?” mother asked. She had brought the axe with her and looked like she was prepared to use it.

“The one you buried under the juniper tree, the one who you are killing your own daughter to atone for. Is that not one of your laws as a witch? If you kill a human, you must pay the price with either your own life or the life of another. This life is to be sacrificed to the devil as a tithe” the green man said as he strode towards us, staring not at the devil, but at mother.

“I-I don’t know what you’re-“ mother stuttered.

“First you killed your husband, so you atoned for that by killing me. Then you realized by killing me, you still had to kill another to atone for my death. So you planned to kill Handsell and then kill my father. But woman, you know that in the end it is you who will go to hell, not the rest of us. Our bodies might be destroyed, but are souls are innocent, free to go as we please” the green man said as he put an arm around me, pulling me up by my waist and pulling me close to his side.

“Release that girl! She is *mine*” The devil growled, lunging for the green man and I.

The green man held up a hand calmly as the devil advanced and to my astonishment a tree grew in place of the devil. It was a crooked, gnarled and cursed looking and seemed to howl at the ground as it curled in on itself.

Then the green man moved his hand up to cup my shoulder and pressed his hand over the wound. A tingling sensation rippled through my body. Vines shot out of my wounded muscles and burst arteries. The intertwined with each other, creating new muscles and ligaments and tissue filled with ore and minerals and life! Somehow, I was getting my arms back!

"What? No! You can't! It's impossible! She cannot be healed, she cannot!" mother screeched and charged at us with her axe.

Just then the old man skidded in front of the two of us and as the axe was about to fall on us, it collided with the old man's chest.

"You alright son?" the old man asked the green man over his shoulder.

The green man stared in shock. He had had his hand raised, ready to turn my mother into a tree, but had hesitated when the old man suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Then the green man smiled a sweet, radiant smile that I knew I had seen a long time ago on a cold winter's night.

"Yes dad, I'm alright" the green man replied, green tears glistening on his eye lashes.

Then it hit me. So this is who the old man was searching for all this time. A part of his heart was just like my real father; he had believed, despite how bad things were, somehow Guniper would find his own way home.

The old man turned to look at mother, who was still holding onto the axe in the old man's chest. Her eyes were wide with horror, and she trembled as she held onto the wooden handle.

The old man reached out a hand and touched mother's face gently and smiled.

"I still love you, even though you *did* kill my son and tried to kill your own daughter. May you find peace, my little goddess" the old man said and mother, for the first time in her life, burst into tears.

She released the wooden handle turned and fled, disappearing through the trees. We could hear her screams of sorrow and madness a long way off for a while, then nothing.

"I'm sorry Handsell, my dear. I'm glad our boy has found a way to restore you. I wish things had never turned out this way" the old man said, tears overflowing from not just the old man's eyes, but from the green man's eyes, as well as mine.

"It's ok Pa Pa, it's ok, go in peace" I smiled weakly and the old man smiled back.

"I'll stay a while to look after Handsell" the green man said and touched his father's shoulder "you go see mother, I know she's waiting for you up there".

The old man nodded and smiled, closing his eyes. As his soul ascended, the shoulder Guniper was touching blossomed leaves and the old man's feet took root. His body became a great oak tree which crushed the crooked tree as it ascended into the sky, growing tall and proud in the rain.

The green man released me and as he did I realized that I had a new pair of arms. They were strong, green, sturdy and alive. I smiled up at the green man and said his name.

"Guniper"

Immediately color blossomed all over his body. His skin became pale beige and his body grew slender. His dark brown hair darkened to black and his eyes shone with unshed tears as he enveloped me in a hug. He was still wearing the clothes of that night long ago, except it now had twigs and leaves in it in places.

"Hansel I'm so glad I made it in time! I wish I had known sooner, but it was only when your blood, screaming and in agony, touched the soil that awakened me from my slumber beneath the tree. It was all I could do to pull myself together to come and rescue you. I'm sorry I was late"

"No, it's alright. I'm just glad you came. I'm just glad you came" I said as I clutched onto him, my tears running down my face like a waterfall" Take me far away from here, I never want to enter that house again. Help me find a new home"

I felt Guniper nod "Then to my sea-side land we go, there, you will find a new home" Guniper smiled and took my hand, and led me through the forest.