

# *The Witch of Schönberg*

## *Paul Kershaw*

### **O n e**

There was an old lady who lived in the wood.

She had not always lived there. Once upon a time, she had lived in Schönberg, an aptly named village not too far from Berlin, but not too close to it, either. Schönberg's population was a few thousand, and consisted primarily of service trades like blacksmiths, wholesalers, and carpenters who supported the farmers in the region.

The old lady had lived there with her husband, the Reverend Wilhelm Schaefer, a stern Lutheran who told the villagers about fire and brimstone and the evil that men do and the eternity of suffering that lay in store for them after death.

The Schaefers had two children, both sons. Gerhardt was the older boy and, to his father's chagrin, was a mama's boy. Gerhardt hated his father, seeing him as domineering at best and abusive at worst. For his part, Wilhelm didn't care so much for his son's love, but had wanted an heir for the missionary work. Gerhardt wasn't interested in religion, or in his father: Gerhardt was destined for hell, and it pleased him. Hell sounded more interesting than heaven.

Jakob was the younger boy. He spent time with his father by default: Gerhardt was unwilling to share their mother. Jakob wasn't particularly interested in preaching the faith, either, though. He had dreams that involved the city, or farther. There were other countries out there, even if his father said they were all the same: Full of sinners who were full of pride and destined to the dark places.

"Jakob has wanderlust," his mother Sonja would say, back in the happy times. Well, happier times: Perhaps it was a stretch to ever say that their lives had been truly happy.

There had always been a pall cast over them, a dark cloud of misery. But at least when their father had still been alive, it was a simple sort of tragedy, the sort of grim numbness through which so many trudged over their lives.

It had been Wilhelm's death that had moved their lives into the realm of the epic.

**Jakob sat on the top of the hill in the middle of the forest.**

He told himself that it was because this was the place with the best vantage point, but the truth of the matter was, he couldn't really see much better here than anywhere. Besides, what did he need a vantage point for, anyway? His days passed in the wood pretty much the same day after day: The danger that there was had stopped being threatening to him. He had learned to hunt adequately, there were no predators but for one, and with that one he'd fashioned an understanding. A truce, if such contracts could ever be called truces.

He told his non-existent audience that he was being diligent, because that had been his original purpose. But he was only being alone.

Alone was how he liked it. Alone meant that there was no-one around to betray him.

In the shadow times, when his father had yet lived, Jakob had had friends.

Johannes, for instance, was the son of the blacksmith. Joh and Jak, they were quite the pair of troublemakers. Jakob would tell his father that everything was Joh's fault, no matter what it was. It would make the stern lectures easier to bear, although the beatings weren't softened. Truth was, more often than not, the ideas had been Jakob's. Joh wasn't a clever boy, but he was a brute and fearless, capable of implementing just about whatever prank Jak was able to devise.

Jak, for his part, had a potential future as an evil genius. His creativity, unfocused and pressured by an unachievable moral standard, became destructive.

There was the time, for instance, when they put tomato juice in the fountain in the square. The angel in the middle looked like she was spitting blood. It was funny, until the filters clogged and shut down the mechanism. And then the stench as the tomatoed water began to stagnate. There was nobody in the town capable of actually fixing the device. A mechanic had to be summoned from Berlin, and it took him a week to get to work. A week, in the August heat.

The caning had lasted half an hour for that one, the whole time Jakob pleading that it had been Joh. All Joh! He had done nothing but watch! Please, papa, I'll never speak to Joh again!

The complaining was counterproductive, of course. One thing that Wilhelm had hoped to teach his sons was to take the discipline with grace and maturity. Which meant sitting still, quiet, no tears, no complaints. Gerhardt had learned, but Jakob still insisted on bucking authority.

Joh had come up with one idea in the time that he and Jak had been the village troublemakers, but Jak had refused to participate: It involved leaving a dead bird they'd found at the edge of the forest on the altar of his father's church. It would have been simple enough, and he might not even have gotten caught.

There were lines, though, that he was unwilling to cross. Unwilling to, or afraid to? And who was he afraid of, his father, or that pair of even sterner, even more dismissive eyes that he felt staring down upon him from on high whenever he entered the church?

That was then, though. When Sonja had been exiled, and her sons with her, Joh hadn't moved to defend Jak. Joh had been by his own father's side when the mob had appeared at their Schönberg home, torches blazing. "We don't care where you go, so long as you leave," Joh's father had said.

Others in the crowd had wanted death, and in the coming years, more and more of them had converted to the opinion that that would have been the better route.

Jakob shared their opinion now. Life would have been much easier for him and Gerhardt had the punishment been death and not exile. Especially for Gerhardt, although Jakob had long lost any sort of empathy for his brother.

"We all make our choices in life," Jakob said to no one in particular, to the memory of his once-loved brother, to the empty air around him on top of his hill.

He turned his head, thinking that he could feel his brother's eyes on him, but there was nothing but the morning birds settling in, tilting their heads at him with curious regard.

"Jakob, my friend, you are going quite mad. Perhaps it's in the blood."

"There's an old lady who lives in the wood."

"Please, Elsa, not this story again." Greta didn't even look up from the sock she was darning.

"I think Elsa's in love with her," Agatha stage-whispered.

"Shut up!" Elsa said. "She's crazy!"

"Who is, Agatha or the old lady?" Greta paused between stitches to glance at Elsa, then went back to work.

Agatha laughed. “Good one!”

Greta looked at her dismissively, like a cat looking at the family dog.

“Well,” Lorita said, “I haven’t heard the story.”

Greta sighed demonstratively. Why was it that the only girls her age in this podunk little village were all so vapid? “You haven’t heard of the Schönberg witch?”

Lorita paused uncomfortably. “No...?”

“And how long have you lived here?”

Agatha chortled. “Dear Greta, you know she’s always lived here.”

Greta put her darning down fully now and glared at Agatha. “Yes. We’ve all always lived here. And we will most likely all die here. Having never left here. And we tell the same stupid superstitious stories over and over, as if they were true.”

“The witch story *is* true!” Elsa insisted. “My uncle met her himself.”

“Would that be the same uncle who showed up to church last week three sheets to the wind, speaking of dragons in his cellar?”

Elsa considered her for a moment. “Maybe there *are* dragons in his cellar. I’ve never been there.”

“Elsa,” Greta said slowly and carefully, “your uncle doesn’t have a cellar.”

“Still. He’s not the only person to talk about the witch in the forest.”

“I heard she wasn’t a witch anyway,” Lorita mumbled.

“So you have heard of her, of course.” Greta picked up her darning again. She had told herself she was being mature, taking care of housework instead of wasting time lollygagging like her friends, but it just helped to have something in her hands. Something to differentiate her from the other hens in the party.

Lorita shrugged. It was a boring afternoon, and it was more entertaining to hear Elsa tell a tall tale than to sit about gossiping about boys.

“She can set fires with her mind,” Elsa said. “That makes her a witch.”

“What fires has she set?” Lorita asked. “If she’s so powerful, why does she live in the forest by herself, instead of coming into town and killing us all?”

Elsa drew herself up high. She was several inches shorter than her friends, despite being months older than both Lorita and Agatha. “She doesn’t want to. She could if she wanted to.”

Agatha nodded nervously. “Why would she *want* to kill us all, anyway?”

“Because she can,” Lorita said. “Isn’t that good enough of a reason?”

Greta looked at Lorita, impressed. There was a malice in her that Greta hadn't truly noticed before. It was just a glimmer, but definitely, there was potential. "At any rate, there's no such thing as witches."

"She killed her husband!"

"Elsa, dear, it doesn't take a witch to kill a man. There's sufficient villainy in the human heart without relying on more sinister means." Greta liked using words like "villainy" and "sinister": They reminded the other girls of their place. They were all 16, but she was the one among them who could roll words like "villainy" off her tongue.

"And we don't even know she did," Lorita said. "There was never a trial. There was just a mob. Mob justice is rarely fair."

Greta hid her disappointment at Lorita's naïveté. "Why don't you just ask her yourself, then?"

Agatha guffawed, that annoying hee-haw of hers, and Elsa shrank back a little, concerned that Lorita make take her up on the dare. The old lady would surely turn her into a toad, or a tree frog, or eat her!

Lorita licked her lips and looked at the other girls. "Maybe I will."

"Lorita!" Elsa sat forward, preparing her warning speech.

"And maybe I won't."

Elsa sighed. "Don't."

Without turning her head, Lorita glanced over at Greta, then back to Elsa. "I won't."

But her jaw was slack in thought, Greta noticed as she went back to her darning.

**Had Jakob Schaefer been keeping track, he would have realized that he had turned twenty-eight sometime during the night.**

Days, though, were meaningless. Months and years passed with little notice. They were there, soldiers lined up one after the other, and as long as he couldn't see the end of the line, he knew he was all right.

He made due. It wasn't a lush existence, and many times he had wondered why he hadn't made good on his childhood dream of Berlin. Or farther: Paris? London? Did such places really exist? Back in Schönberg, Little Jak had heard the stories from the merchants that passed through. And his father, too, told of other places, havens of evil and sin.

But Schönberg itself had become a myth. Now and again, Jakob would go to the edge of the wood and look down into the valley below. He could see houses with smoke coming from the chimneys, and movement of objects, perhaps people, perhaps animals.

He didn't dare leave the forest, though. Not so long as his mother still lived. He didn't fear his mother: He feared his brother, and more, he feared what his brother would do if he left the forest.

Gerhardt might go down into the valley. Gerhardt had sworn vengeance against the wrongs perpetrated against their mother. His mother. Their mother.

Jakob wasn't sure if Gerhardt would still recognize the concept of "their mother": He had become so possessive. Jakob had a father, Gerhardt had a mother. That was how he'd seen it, even before he'd started to slip. Before the madness that had overtaken their mother had overtaken him, too.

And what madness was it, at that? Even within the imagination of a 13-year-old Jak, it had hardly been believable.

At 28, Jakob didn't worry about the believable. His father had tried to train him in the art of believing the ludicrous: A loving God torturing his creations for eternity, an undead saviour walking the earth for a month, a day when a multi-headed beast would rise up onto the earth and wage war on the good people. Jakob had grown to believe those were just stories, even as a young teen. Life had succeeded where his father had failed: It was not Jakob's task to believe or not believe, because what was was, regardless of what Jakob believed.

Perhaps another reason why Jakob failed to leave the forest was because he feared that the darkness that had consumed his mother and brother, that had slaughtered his father with a scythe (how had she lifted it?), also lurked within his own heart.

Was he protecting the world from Gerhardt, or from himself?

"What of the old lady who lives in the wood?"

"Lo! It's best not to speak of such things." Her mother set a stack of plates in front of her. "Set the table, now. Put such things out of your mind, and out of your mouth."

"How old was I, mother?"

Her mother sighed, but she knew Lorita's persistence. "I don't remember, dear. It's been years, so many years."

“All I remember are the stories. The stories the other girls tell. Elsa thinks the witch can set people on fire with her mind.” As she spoke, she set the plates out around the table, and went to collect up the utensils from the drawer. Wooden. Elsa’s family had metal. Elsa’s Uncle Johannes was the blacksmith.

“Don’t clutter your mind with horror stories,” her mother said. “Not of that one, at least. You were a baby, God bless you. God blessed you by making you too young to remember.”

“Greta remembers.”

“Greta says many things,” her mother said quietly. “Some of them are correct.”

“Greta says there’s no such thing as witches anyway,” Lorita said as she finished setting up for dinner. “Greta says she’s just a crazy old lady who killed her husband.”

“Greta says, Greta says,” her mother parroted. “God does not like it when we say bad things about others, but I feel obliged to point out that Greta’s mother doesn’t even make her attend Sunday services.”

“So?” Lorita looked at her mother defensively, even disrespectfully. “Maybe Greta’s right. And maybe the old lady didn’t even do anything.”

The room grew quiet as mother considered daughter. “You’re growing so quickly,” she said at last.

Lorita blushed, and became a girl again. “I’m sorry, Mother. You’re right, I shouldn’t speak of such things. It’s just that, sometimes, life seems so unfair.”

“Life is unfair, but God is fair. Trust that God has given us the correct wisdom.”

“Yes, Mother.” She said it distantly, since her mind was elsewhere.

**Jakob watched the moon make its circuit across the sky.**

He supposed he drifted off now and then: The waking world and the world of dreams weren’t that much different anyway. Monsters populated each, as did anxiety.

When he felt the flames lapping up all around him, he realized he was asleep; when he heard the crickets, he thought he was awake. He knew that the moon couldn’t be moving perceptibly, so the blinks that he thought were only lasting a moment or two must have been lasting hours.

As a child, the night had been mysterious and frightening. His mother had always been adamant that he be in the house before dark. The dark was Satan’s realm.

That night in Schönberg, even his bed hadn't been safe. In fact, it would have been safer for him to out in the wild, with the snakes and the wolves and the blackguards who'd cut your throat into a macabre smile and leave you to bleed to death until the angels came for your soul.

Twelve. A month before his birthday: Unlucky thirteen came four weeks early.

Had it been Gerhardt's fault? Or mother's? Or father's? Things happened so quickly, and all Little Jak heard were the noises. Voices, loud voices.

Gerhardt had been out late, and the day before services, too. The time that the demons were most active, most able to take him. And so father got the cane again, and told him to stand against the wall.

"That won't do, not anymore," the teen said. "I'm a man now, and I'll be respected as one. Soon I'll leave, be on my own."

"You'll do as you're told so long as you're in this house." There was a weariness that Jakob could only hear in his memories; at the time, Little Jak could only hear rage.

"I'm almost your height. What will you do, little man, when I'm bigger than you?"

Then a slap. At first, Jak had thought that his brother had slapped their father, but that was when their mother spoke: "Don't you slap my child!" Caning had always been okay, but slapping was off limits. It made no sense to Jakob, either then or now.

"I shan't be spoken to like that in my home!"

"Your home is down the street, preacher man," Sonja spat. "This is no longer your place."

There was silence then, uncomfortable silence. Jak strained to hear his father: "The devil has taken you both."

"You and your gospel. God never had us."

Then a slap, a louder one. Jak held his knees to his chest in his bed. His parents had never fought before. His mother had always spoken so politely to his father, even as she cast her eyes down. Behind his back, she spoke venom, but to his face, she had always been the doting wife.

Jak had felt the fever rising in the house, though, for some months. Perhaps a year or two. A tinderbox.

He felt the urge now to run out, and stop them, step between them. Something deep inside him knew that his chance had passed, his window for intervention had closed, with that slap.

The next voice was Gerhardt's: "Do not touch my mother again." The voice was low, ominous, a wolfish growl. The voice of an angry man, no longer a boy.

Jakob could visualize his father, trapped between the two rebels. He had sympathy for the man, despite the abuse the boy had experienced himself at the wrong end of that capricious cane, or worse, when Wilhelm took out the Bible and alternated readings with beatings. Empathy, for such a beast - because it was all that he knew. It was the way that fathers were.

"This family," Wilhelm said, "has gone to Satan. It is no longer mine."

With that, Jak's sympathy disappeared. He had been lumped in, included. He had done nothing, nothing wrong, and yet he was one of the sinners. He had prayed with his father, and begged for understanding, and though he was a wayward lad, he was still yet a lad, not yet a man, certainly not turned to the dark.

He again had the urge to burst into the dispute, but this time not to intercede, but to confront. What had he done? Why was he included in the indictment? Anger welled up inside of him, and he was so caught up inside of it that he lost track of the argument outside.

When he became conscious of it again, it had turned into a full-on scuffle, and Jak couldn't tell who was doing what to whom. Furniture overturned. Punches were thrown. The sound of things breaking. Yelling, insults, fire and brimstone interspersed with emasculating mockery.

And then a sickeningly soft noise. Jakob wasn't sure whether he'd actually heard anything, or his memory had filled in the noise from repeated elaborations. He had long since lost track of which parts of the story were true and which were such elaborations. Memory is so malleable.

Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

Quietly, a boy's scared voice: "What have we done, Mother?"

More silence, then a confident voice: "What we should have done a long time ago. We've sent him to his beloved Lord."

"What shall we do now?"

Jakob visualized his mother looking at Gerhardt, blood on her dress, fire in her eyes. "We're liberated. Free."

"But won't people want to puni..."

He never got the word out because she'd slapped him across the face. "You will protect me, you little shit. You and your worthless brother."

Gerhardt growled in response, a deep-throated growl that wasn't threatening so much as it was, indeed, protective.

In a few days, the mob would build up enough pressure to cause their exile. She was a woman. A witch, and a woman, and the mob was torn between the lust for violent vengeance and fear of what else she'd do.

They'd found their way into the forest, and Gerhardt would build them a house: First, a makeshift one, to keep protection from the rain of the late summer, but later a more permanent one. Considering it had been made by sixteen-year-old hands working alone, using an axe he'd found during a late night raid into the village, it was passably made.

That was before the solitude began to get the better of them, before the madness took over.

If you tell a story often enough, it starts to come true. In the village, they spoke of the people in the woods: The witch, and the monster son, and the hostage son. Through each telling, the descriptions grew ever more wild, more unbelievable, until the force of narrative will took its toll on the family in the wood.

At some point, reminiscing yet again in his solitude, Jakob drifted off to sleep.

**Jakob sat bolt upright.**

There was a noise he wasn't familiar with. A shuffling, far off in the distance, in the direction of the village.

It had been nothing. A bad dream.

It was morning.

## **T w o**

**"Lorita! Lorita! I've been calling..."**

Her mother was speaking as she came down the hall to Lorita's room, but she stopped mid-sentence when she noticed that Lorita's bed was empty and made. Lorita was nowhere to be found.

"Oh, dear Lo, God bless you, where have you gotten to?"

She didn't have much time to think about it, with the morning chores to be done. Teenage girls, so unreliable. But Lorita would get a talking to when she showed up, for certain.

The forest was imposing.

Lorita hadn't fully noticed that before. The forest had been, before, something that existed on the corner of her mind. The stuff of horror stories told among the hen parties, but not real. Not really real, not dark and forboding and large as life. The trees grew as high as she could see, and with the morning light, it was night and day where she stood. Behind her: Sunshine, peering up over the hills, and the comfort of home. Before her: A dark cave of trees and undergrowth, and ominous noises of chattering and clicking and slithering and goodness knows what else.

"Why am I doing this?" she asked herself. There was the story she'd been telling others of wanting to prove the old lady's innocence, but that was too high-and-mighty a reason. She was curious, and she was bored with listening to frightened tales told in hushed voices, as if the witch were going to swoop down and eat their heads.

Maybe that wasn't it either. She felt drawn to this, as if it were an inevitability, as if there were a drama whose script had already been written, and she was just now acting out the lines. She could no more not do this than she could stop breathing. It was her destiny.

Reverend Weiss might say she was doing it because God had so ordained that it be done. Was that it? Was she a pawn for God in a game whose outcome only he knew?

She pulled her cowl around her shoulders; it wasn't chilly, but she was feeling cold all the same. It provided comfort. Inside her own cave, the one she'd brought with her, the cave of trees didn't seem quite so daunting.

The tree-line was abrupt, and that added to the ominous spirit. She stood yet on the well-coifed pasture abutting the wood, close enough to reach into the darkness but still safe. She still hadn't broken through the veil, for it felt very much like one, that the barrier between comfort and wilderness was tangible. She feared that she would step forward and the veil would stretch with her, holding her back. Semantics: Did she fear that, or hope that?

"Lo, you are being a silly girl. There's nothing to fear."

She chided herself, but it didn't set her legs into motion. Everything she had been raised to fear was on the other side of that veil. At the core of it all was the woman, the Schönberg witch, but other demons awaited as well. And what of the stories that hadn't been

told? What if there were demons whose victims had no chance of escape and, therefore, could not have lived to tell the tales?

“Are you a screamy little girl, then?” she asked herself. “You’re making far too much of this.”

Besides, Greta says there’s no such thing as witches.

Her mother’s voice mocked back: “Greta says, Greta says,” and then Lorita mustered up all she had within herself and took a step forward.

She was now in the darkness of the wood, and nothing cataclysmic happened. She stepped again, and again, and as she entered fully the steps came easier, until she was far enough in that she could no longer see the sun. That wasn’t so bad; there was still light, albeit thin.

Soon enough, she forgot her worries and was strolling merrily along, looking for signs of life, if any really existed.

**Jakob told himself that he was just imagining things, but something felt amiss.**

Today, things felt differently. Something in the air, a noise, a ripple? He could feel Gerhardt moving around, farther from the house than he normally was. As far as he knew, Gerhardt hadn’t left the forest in years; the midnight raids on Schönberg had long passed as the three of them had gotten used to the rhythm of the woods. The boys had learned to hunt, although Jakob preferred a vegetarian life. Not so Gerhardt: He was a carnivore, capable of rending raw flesh from bone if it suited him. He loved the splash of warm blood on his skin.

Yes, Gerhardt, or what was left of him.

Jakob listened carefully, holding his ears taut against his skull. No competition for his brother, of course, not in his brother’s current state. Jakob had long thought about sneaking up on him, killing him before there was a chance to react, but Jakob knew better. Hearing, smell, sight... all of these things went with who, what, his brother had become.

How had it happened? Had the villagers been right, was his mother really a witch? The murder itself was barbaric, but still, human. A human act of rage. As was their ostracism, the vengeful mob forcing them out of town. They should have made their way to another town, lived in peace, in relative sanity.

Somehow, things had gone wrong. In those hours, days, weeks of lingering in the wood, the solitude and... yes, the self-righteousness of his mother’s pent-up anger releasing

itself through that scythe that had cut his father apart... in all of that, a pall had risen, and the three of them had stopped simply being three people trying to make their way in a carnivorous world. They had become pawns in a saga, a myth unto themselves.

It had started with that canine growl Jakob had heard the night his father was killed. That was not the seed, but it was the first eruption of green from the ground, as the stalk burst forth. It was fed on the accusations of witchery, even though Jakob had only heard a few. He knew, Gerhardt knew, Sonja knew that in Schönberg, the children were praying for protection from the three of them.

Slowly, and luckily for him, Jakob had been forgotten in the village. He became a ghost, an afterthought.

The leaves rustled. Gerhardt? This far from the house? Yes, and going in the direction of the town, too. Because, beyond there, another noise. A small one.

Perhaps Jakob's hearing was better than he'd thought. A new noise, and it was crystal clear.

Lorita had been nearly skipping, but she stopped short and caught her breath. Had the tree moved?

"Is there somebody there?"

She'd been following what appeared to be a path, although it didn't really make much sense that there'd be a path there at all. It must have just been happenstance that there was a thinning in the forest that led her in a particular direction. She became acutely aware that she wasn't really sure if she could find her way back out.

"What are you doing here, silly girl?" she asked herself. "And getting spooked at nothing, too."

Lorita took another step, and again the trees moved. This time, she could feel eyes watching her. Bats? Snakes? A deer? A wolf?

She'd heard tales of wolves, with their big, blood-stained teeth and their yellow eyes that burned with hunger. Elsa, especially, loved to elaborate in gory detail. Elsa's cousin had been killed by a wolf, or so she'd said. Head torn off the body, so the funeral was closed-casket. They'd buried only the parts they could find.

"Is there somebody there?" she asked again.

"It was a good question." The voice from the bushes was low, barely human, raspy like the man had a wood file in his throat.

“A good...?” She scoured the bushes, looking for a hint of the source of the voice. She was torn between running and attacking, so instead she stood her ground.

“A good question: What are you doing here, silly girl?”

Lorita licked her lips nervously. “Who’s there? Show yourself.”

“Hiding is part of the fun.”

Lorita didn’t like the predatory taunt in the voice, but she knew that if she wavered or showed fear, she was at more risk. She pulled herself up as tall as she could. “I’m visiting... my... grandmother.”

It was a terrible lie, and she knew it as soon as the words left her lips. It was too late to take back, though.

And then her teenaged stubbornness kicked in: Why was she talking to this person who refused to show himself, anyway? What business was it of his? He obviously wasn’t a helpful sort.

She began to walk along the imagined path again, and after a few minutes, she began to wonder if the voice had given up. If she hadn’t imagined it altogether.

Lorita stopped when she saw the eyes. Black, pitch black pebbles against a sea of white. Human? Uncertain.

They receded before she had a chance to look at the face that went with them. The breath, though: He’d left a cloud of stench, fresh meat and tree bark, and decay.

“Where are you going?”

“I told you,” she said defiantly. “Who are you?”

“I live here.” It was not a response, it was a dare. A confrontation.

She stepped towards the voice. “Why do you hide? Are you that hideous?”

“You do not wish to live.”

Lorita felt herself becoming angry, but held herself back. “Do you know the way to the old woman’s house?”

“She is not your grandmother.”

“I don’t have time for this.” She tried her best sixteen-year-old huff.

“You smell of young flesh. Perhaps I should eat you.”

There was something in the voice, the way the words rolled around her ear, seductively, like the snake of Eden. It was not threatening so much as wistful, and it was that wistfulness that clutched at Lorita’s chest. Her feet urged her to turn and run, while she still could.

Instead, she pulled her cowl closer around her head, so her face was fully hidden. “I have a purpose here.”

“You have a purpose here.”

“Yes.”

“What purpose could you possibly have, except to provide my dinner?”

The voice was moving around her, in a large circle, always to the other side of this tree or that one. He was reminding her that he knew the lay of the land, every twig, every bramble, and that she was lost, or all but lost.

“Then eat me.”

“Don’t worry,” he said, “I will. But your meat is not yet tender enough yet, your smell does not tingle with fear. Do you know what it feels like to be eaten alive? Have you ever seen death?”

“Have you ever been eaten alive?” she asked, priding herself on the cleverness of the challenge.

Silence. Long, crippling silence, in which she contemplated running away, letting instinct guide her.

Eventually, the rasp returned: “Yes. I devoured myself, and was born anew.”

“I don’t fear you. I think you hide because you’re not frightening at all. I don’t fear you one bit.”

There was no response at first, and Lorita noticed that the silence was complete. Even the insects that had been chirping in the distance had grown quiet. There was no sound at all, except for the beating in her chest.

When the voice was audible again, it was loud and right behind her: “You don’t?”

She turned slowly, painfully aware that whoever it was was close enough to her that she could feel his heat. She feared touching him as she turned, but she also feared not turning at all, not facing him.

In the half-light of the forest, Lorita didn’t know if she was seeing clearly or not. He was tall, much taller than her, and stood like a man, but he was covered in coarse fur, even his face. He was naked, and though she was frightened, she was also aroused by the thing which dangled between his legs. His chest was large, pushed forward. His face, elongated like a dog’s. Like a wolf’s.

And those eyes, so dark and large and hungry.

Gerhardt smiled wide, or so she imagined. It was hard to tell with his strange face. Her heart quickened, but still she stood firm. “No,” she said tersely, “I don’t.”

He leaned forward, his nose to hers. She closed her eyes, hoping that her hood still hid her, even as he invaded her presence. That breath... that breath! The death that rode upon that breath!

“I can smell the fear on your skin, little girl. I can smell your blood rushing to your pores. If I licked you, I would taste the dread in the salt of your sweat.”

“What... what do you want?”

“Why did you come into the forest?”

He did not lean back, and she would not, and so the air within her cowl became more tainted each time he exhaled. Her legs were weak, but she needed to stay strong. “Do you really need to know?”

That time, he did lean back, so that he could laugh. There was no humor in that laugh, just cynical surprise. “I couldn’t care less, little girl. I couldn’t care less.”

“I want to meet the old lady. I want to see if she’s as evil as they say.”

Gerhardt considered her. Her naïveté was touching, almost endearing. “Then perhaps I’ll let you pass. For now.”

“Thank you,” she said, feeling as if she’d won a victory. She wished Greta was here, though: Greta could have told her whether it had been a real victory, or just for show.

Gerhardt leaned forward again, so that his nose (snout?) grazed her cheek. Was it a kiss? It hadn’t felt like a kiss, it had felt more animalistic. A scent marking, and now Lorita’s cheek tingled with the wetness.

Before she had a chance to respond, Gerhardt bounded away into the wood and was gone.

**Jakob was frozen.**

He’d traced the conversation down just as Gerhardt was leaving. He told himself that it was because of his arrival that Gerhardt had abruptly bounded away, but he knew it wasn’t true.

How long had it been since he’d seen another person? A person, that is, not the wolfish abomination that was his brother or the ethereal outline that his mother was rapidly becoming. He was still a real person; he had so far escaped becoming a monster like his family.

Here, too, was a real person, flesh and blood.

Jakob wanted to speak to her, to say... what, though? He hadn't spoken to a girl for so long. Since before the turning, before the killing.

She stood where Gerhardt had left her for a few minutes, and she was obviously shaken.

He watched her while she stood. She had pulled back her red hood, and a sunbeam broke through the trees to drape across her face—or perhaps she'd found the light, in order to feel an island of comfort in the dark womb of the forest. Either way, Jakob was mesmerized by the soft perfection of her skin, the shimmering flaxen hair, the gentle lips, the eyes which expressed just a hint of concern.

He stepped forward, full into the small clearing where Gerhardt had confronted her. "You shouldn't be here." His voice sounded so soft compared to the guttural roughness of his brother's.

Lorita turned sharply to face him. She wanted to be defiant to him as well, he could tell, but her socialization kicked in. He was an older person, and a male at that. She held her tongue. "I'm here to see the witch."

"Why?"

He stood up closer to her, impressed that she didn't flinch. Concerned, too. Was she brave, or hopelessly naïve? His brother had known that she wouldn't be easily dissuaded, and that it would be easier and more entertaining to dispatch her in the house than out here. Jakob could see now why he'd thought that.

"How long have you lived here?" she asked.

"Why do you want to see the old woman?" he reiterated.

They looked at each other, each faced with a question they didn't want to answer. In Jakob's case, it was because he didn't really know anymore. It had become irrelevant, anyone: Time was meaningless. Each day was just a day he'd failed to die, or failed to do something about his family.

Maybe the girl didn't know the answer to the question, either. Jakob sensed the answer to the question was simple, anyway: Because she had to be. Because it was time. Because there's only so long that a stand-off can persist before the universe will do something to break it up.

He was standing close enough to her that he could smell her. She smelled of peaches and summertime, with a hint of smoke from last night's hearth fire. She smelled of honey

and lavender and garlic, and other flavors that resided only in the distant corners of Jakob's memory.

"Do you know where she lives?"

"Oh, that I didn't! And you shouldn't. You're not supposed to be here." Even though the last sentence was a lie.

"You said that already."

"Please go. Please go back to Schönberg. That's where you belong."

He was standing close enough to her that he could feel her heat. She hadn't flinched, hadn't stepped back, hadn't made any motions to indicate that he was unwelcome. Quite the opposite: As he had approached, her stance had softened.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"That's not important."

"My name is Lorita," she said. "And I want to know what's going on."

**"My name is Jakob," the stranger said, in a definitive voice that contradicted his denial of importance.**

Lorita looked up at him, vaguely aware that he was much closer than Mother would have wanted her to let a strange man get. Was she just disoriented from the altercation with the beast-man? Had she let her guard down more than she should have?

There was something magnetic about Jakob, though. Something vulnerable and kind and... "harmless" came to mind, but perhaps "protective" was more fair.

That was the disorientation talking, she told herself. She was still afraid of the beast, even though she had tried her best to face up to the threat.

"Who are you?" she asked again.

"There are monsters in these woods," he said, and she couldn't tell if he'd meant to include himself in that reference. "You should go back to Schönberg."

"There's an old lady who lives in the wood," she said. "Or so say the stories."

"She's old, yes, that's true."

"Is she a witch?"

He looked at her, his brown eyes meeting her blue ones. He was holding back, and said nothing.

"I'm going to find out for myself, you know. I don't believe the stories. I'm betting she's just a lonely, harmless old woman."

“Maybe you should listen to the stories.” He reached out and held her arm, and her heart skipped a beat: Fear, or desire? At first, she thought fear, but then she began to tingle between her thighs. Foolish girl, Lo, foolish girl.

“Are they true, then?”

“Why do you question them?”

“I’m not sure. I believe there’s good in everyone, I guess.”

“There’s good in everyone, but sometimes it’s been crushed so soundly by the bad that it’s useless and unreachable.”

“So you know the old lady?”

He’d let her arm go, and she found herself wishing that he’d put his hand back. He had a dramatic musk to him which stung her nostrils but aroused her. He was nature: Had he ever even bathed? His skin was streaked with grime and dirt, and his hands were rough. His arms bore signs of scars, where she could see his skin in the tears of his ill-fitting, ragged clothing, clothing he’d no doubt stolen from Schönberg years ago.

“She was my mother, once,” he said distantly.

“And now?”

“I don’t know anymore. I just don’t know.”

## **T h r e e**

I am the old lady who lives in the wood.

Do you believe in God? Do you believe in Hell, or in Satan, or in the angels in their Heaven or the demons down below? Is life a clockwork war of good against evil, with human pawns in the middle?

I was once just like you: A person trying to live her life. My husband was evil: Was I evil to kill evil? Was I a sinner for excising that beast from this world?

I think not.

But he sits now by God’s side, across from Jesus, and prays each night with the angels for my redemption.

I don’t need his redemption. I don’t need their redemption. If Hell is my fate for destroying the evil that God had wrought, then so be it. I will spend eternity in Hell as my reward for a just act.

I’ve seen him in heaven. I’ve seen Heaven, I’ve seen Hell. For over a decade, I’ve been confined to this house, but I’ve traveled more than anyone could imagine. I’ve been to the

ends of the earth, to other planets, to the core of the sun. I've seen the torments that await those of us who challenge His Almighty Rules, and the glories that await the sycophantic sheep that baa in obeisance.

Does that make me a witch?

Perhaps.

I don't care.

Gerhardt thinks that I'm confined to my bed. He stands in the window and watches me, when he brings me food he's collected. I can hear him, but I refuse to look. What has he become? He allowed his evil to become him, by wearing the mantle that those meaningless ants in Schönberg put upon him. They tried to put it upon me, as well, but I refused to wear it.

I am not the witch. They are the witches, by willing me and my son to be monsters.

They're not important, my husband was not important, my sons... I love them, but they're just not important. The universe is bigger than all of us, and few of us become enlightened enough to realize that.

I dream. I'm in the Dreaming. I sleep, and awaken to feed my body and urinate and defecate so that I can continue to dream. One day, I will no longer need my body, but God has seen fit to continue to torment me. To try to break me down. To wear at me. He won't succeed. The torture has become meaningless to me.

I am.

That is the sole knowledge I have of any value: I am.

One of the ants has wandered into the forest. Gerhardt came into my haven to tell me, as if I hadn't already known. I know everything there is to know. I knew that Lorita (of course, I know her name) had come into the forest. Prying Lorita, but it's all right. It's as it should be, as it has been ordained.

I am to be redeemed. That's what God thinks. I am to be touched by her sacrifice and turn back my soul.

My soul has never turned. I am who I've always been. When I took that scythe in my hands, I was not turning from God, I was announcing an allegiance I had long had. It was why I had brought the scythe into the house in the first place.

To the villagers, it had seemed an act of passion, of course. It had been premeditated. I was done. Through. Tired of playing by the rules that the man's society, that the man's God, had set down from me. It was liberation. I was free.

Damned if I'm going to start pretending now.

I know how it will end. I know how it must end. I accept that. This was all an inevitability: I've known for a long time how it must end.

I've been waiting for it. For the moment when my Dreaming must end.

When Gerhardt, dear Gerhardt, burst into my house, eyes wild with hunger and lust, I knew the moment was coming near.

"Mother!" he said. "There's a villager in the woods!"

To Jakob, he was solid and firm; to Lorita, he had been overbearing and mammalian. To me, he was still the frightened little boy who thought the villagers would forgive him for helping to kill his own father, their preacher, a man of God.

If only he'd apologized, they'd've forgiven him.

Foolish boy.

He didn't understand the concept of liberation, because one day he had been destined to become part of the rule-followers. Maybe even a rule-maker.

Dear, dear fool.

It wasn't as painful as I'd thought it might be. The end of Sonja, the body, the flesh that had lain rotting for years on that infernal makeshift bed of leaves and feathers.

Gerhardt tried to stop me, of course. His plans were different, but that was no matter. What he wanted meant little more to me than what any other man on the planet wanted.

He was not as powerful as he'd thought. I was more powerful than he'd thought. He tried to argue with me, telling me to hide so that he could deal with the interloper on his own. I reminded him that she'd come to see me, and come to see me she would.

As he was pleading with me in his little boy voice, I grabbed that mouth of his and pried it open.

His eyes filled with surprise. I had taken him off guard. Good.

I tore it open further, preternaturally far, and stuck my head into it.

He gathered himself now, and pushed back at me, but I wrapped my meager arms around him and pulled him closer, my head pushing into his throat. He gagged as I fought my way down further, moving my hands quickly from being around his waist to the sides of his mouth so I could pull myself in.

Being eaten is an odd sensation, but it's not painful. It's comforting, to be covered in the warmth and the darkness. I wondered if that's how he'd felt being born from me, only in

reverse: The moment of fear of emerging from the safety of the womb through the vagina into the bright, dry, callous loudness of the universe.

It was a gift I was giving him, in that last moment, of seeing what it was like to give birth. The loss it entails, just as devouring another is to gain their essence. To become one with them: Birth is a relinquishing of that union.

Slowly, I crawled down his throat and into his stomach. He expanded to make room, as I'd known he would. It defied reason, but Gerhardt had long defied reason anyway. Everything makes sense in a nightmare.

As I pulled my feet into his mouth, I felt it snap shut behind me. It was done.

The acid ate away at my flesh, faster than it should have, but as fast as I'd known it would.

As Sonja's body softened, I moved out of it, moved upward. The eating had been relatively painless, but the merging struck me to my core. Gerhardt was confused, worried, and lost. Little Gerry was unsure what to do: The person who had been his guiding light, his reason for persisting in a cruel world, was gone now. What was he going to do?

He was easy to crush. There's only room in a body for one soul, and his was no longer of any use anyway. God would forgive him, of course. He'd been a slave to me. He'd wanted to follow the rules, and I was the only one willing to give him rules to follow. There are leaders, and there are followers. Gerhardt, dear fool, was a follower.

God will forgive him.

I stood at the mirror, looking at my new face in the reflection. Gerhardt, you were one ugly beast.

"Goodbye, dear son," I said to my reflection. "I always loved you."

It is time.

**Jakob watched Lorita walking away.**

He'd tried to stop to her, to explain the dangers to her. At the same time, he'd been increasingly distracted by his desire for her. Why couldn't he concentrate? Why did her presence make his head swim? He'd dedicated himself to protecting the world from his brother and mother, and when the opportunity had presented itself, he'd failed.

He thought about calling out to her, to get her to stop, come back, leave the forest. He'd promise to leave the forest with her. They wouldn't have to go back to Schönberg. They

could go anywhere. He'd want to go anywhere. Berlin, Paris, London... anywhere she wanted to go. Anywhere but here.

The moment for that had passed, though. He felt like the pieces of fate's puzzle were falling into place around him, and he was powerless to do anything but watch it collapse as it would.

"Damn you, Jakob," he whispered to himself, self-conscious that she might hear even though she was well out of sight, and earshot. "Damn you to Hell."

Lorita walked away slowly at first.

She was waiting for him to call out to her, to tell her to stop, to provide the one last bit of argument that would stop her. She didn't want to go back to the village, she wanted to spend more time with him, looking into his eyes, feeling his strong hand on her arm, listening to the soothing timbre of his voice.

She'd come in with a goal, but even at the time she'd entered the forest the goal had begun to seem meager. A teenage act of rebellion, rebelling against an entire village, but had she really thought it all the way through? How do stories get started in the first place if there's not some bit of truth to them?

And her experience with Gerhardt, that should have been enough to convince her that maybe she was in over her head, but she had something to prove now. She'd prove it, or die trying.

The thought gave her pause: Perhaps she *would* die. Perhaps she'd become another part of the story. They'd tell the tale of how the witch seduced a teenage girl into the forest in order to torture her. "Nobody's really sure if she died that day, but she was never heard from again." It would be the final line of a tale told by some future Elsa to a future Lorita and a future Agatha while a future Greta rolled her eyes in a display of agnostic ennui.

Greta used words like "agnostic ennui," but where had Lorita picked it up?

"From Greta, of course, you goose," Lorita clucked at herself. Breaking the silence like that let her realize that Jakob wasn't coming after her, and that she was in this to the end.

Whatever the end might be.

She put her cowl back up over her head and pulled it tight around her shoulders. The forest, which had begun to look harmless in the presence of Jakob, looked ominous and threatening again.

What *was* she doing here?

**She'd lost track of time by the time she found the house.**

It was a makeshift house. She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting. Something professional, perhaps. Maybe with bits of candy glued to the outside, as witches' houses were supposed to have. She was expecting it to be in the middle of a large clearing, as well, with a clear path leading up to it. Windows, and a second floor, and a proper roof, and whatever else it was that she'd built up in her mind.

Instead, if she hadn't known to look for a house, she might not have seen it at all. It was nestled between two trees, which had been used as living supports. As a result, the thatched roof had been lifted up slightly from the walls as the trees had grown. The walls were made of poorly cut flats of wood, a mix of bits looted from Schönberg and chunks that Gerhardt had hewn himself. There were no steps leading to an inviting porch: There was just an opening that passed for a doorway, but which seemed to be a gap that had been left there by happenstance. It looked like the sort of treehouse a teenage boy might build, except it was on the ground.

*Which is what it is*, Lorita told herself, making sure not to say it out loud lest she signal her presence anymore than she needed to.

She walked up to the doorway and looked inside. A few rays of afternoon sun that had made their way through the net of trees lingered through the roof and gave dismal light to the one-room structure. In one corner: A stench-ridden pile that probably represented the leftovers of dinners past. The compost heap caused Lorita to gag a little. In another corner: A table, or so it seemed to be meant to be, with a stump set up as a chair. The sun glinted off a piece of glass set on the table and leaning against the wall, and Lorita imagined it had been meant to be used as a mirror. Farther, against the back wall, there was a flattened pile of twigs and feathers that had a rag stretched across them, an uncomfortable place to sleep.

"Is there anybody there?" Lorita asked tentatively.

Silence answered, and then something in the darkness shifted. A soft, gruff voice responded: "Who's there?" It was a curious voice, not demanding or threatening, and Lorita felt a bit more at ease.

"My name is Lorita. I come from town." She strained her eyes to see into the darkness.

"What do you want?" The shadows shifted again.

It was a question she should have known she'd be asked, and she should have had an answer ready, but she had nothing ready. "I wanted to meet you."

"Why?"

More thought, and another poorly prepared answer: "There are stories about you. Can I... can I see you?"

"What sort of stories do they tell about me?" the voice asked, and now it was beginning to growl. Lorita, who had stepped into the house a bit more to see if her eyes would adjust to the scant light, resisted the urge to turn and run. Inside, a voice said, *Okay, you've met her, she really is a monster, let's go.*

"Stories about how you killed your husband." Lorita scolded herself for the tactless honesty. *Mind your tongue, child:* her mother's voice.

"How could I have done such a thing? Come closer, child, you'll see I'm just a harmless old lady."

"But your son..." Tact!

"Boys tell stories," she said, and her voice softened again, despite its low gravelly growl. "Come closer, so I can look at you."

Lorita was standing within touching distance of the bed now, and she could barely make an outline of someone reclined under a rag.

"Don't be scared, it's all right. Come closer."

Lorita stepped forward, nudging the bed with her ankle. She realized that her heart was beating heavy, and she felt dizzy. "Why do you live alone out here?"

"I'm not alone, silly girl, I have my boys, and the birds, and the sunshine."

The figure sat up, so a lone sunbeam fell across the face, and Lorita at once recognized the profile. Those ears, elongated and raised above her skull... those eyes, hungry and white... those teeth, glistening with saliva....

Lorita stepped back. "Gerhardt!"

The beast smiled vaguely, a malicious smile that shook Lorita to her core. "No, child, not Gerhardt, not any longer."

"Where is your mother?" She stepped back a few more steps, keeping her attention on the beast on the bed.

"I am she. I am he. And soon, I will be you."

Lorita turned to run, catching her toe on the edge of the compost pile and collapsing to the ground.

She turned to get to get up, but by now, Sonja was standing over her, straddling her hips.

“What’s the matter, little girl? Isn’t this the party you expected it to be?”

“Please... I’m sorry, I didn’t know....”

“Didn’t know what? I’m the star of every horror tale they tell back in town. The crazy old woman who killed her husband and then turned her sons into monsters. Did you think it was all a lie?”

“I didn’t think....”

“You didn’t think at all. That’s why you’re here, you silly little creature. That’s why I have to kill you.”

The last two words were spoken carefully, deliberately, and they accomplished their goal: Lorita seized up and began to cry, her panic system having been completely overwhelmed. She wanted to scream, to flail, to attack, to run, to hide, but nothing came but tears, and she curled up in a ball at Sonja’s feet.

Sonja smiled and inhaled deeply, taking in the scent of tortured fear, the odor of panic and sweat. She licked her lips hungrily, her stomach aching to devour this supposedly innocent morsel.

What would God think of her then? Was this the redemption He’d had in mind for her?

“It will be slow, it will be painful, and there’s nothing you can do about it,” Sonja whispered in a low voice that rumbled through Lorita’s ears.

Lorita curled up tighter and cried, her mind having slipped away into the dark madness that had come upon the entire forest around her.

Sonja took her by the foot and began to swallow her, taking care not to chew: To chew would have been hedonistic; she wanted to savor every detail of the digestion.

Lorita was too wracked with fear to fight, and by the time Sonja had gotten to her waist, she was completely numb. It was only with the vagueness of awareness when, ten minutes later, Sonja closed her mouth around her head, and everything was dark, hot, and constricting.

Was this what it felt like to die? Lorita prayed silently with the last remnant of her sanity that God take care of her family, and shield anyone else from this fate.

Jakob arrived just as Gerhardt closed his mouth.

He was always the most distracted right after he'd fed. Jakob had thought about that in the past, lurking just before dinner and using that time to attack, but he'd never gotten the courage.

Gerhardt had never eaten a human before, though. This was a line that Jakob had feared would some day be crossed, and a line that should not be crossed.

Jakob had come ready, as Sonja had known he would: Armed with the same axe that Gerhardt had used to cut the wood for this house.

He swung almost before she had a chance to respond, and the head grazed her shoulder. She winced and yelped from the shock, and turned to face him fully.

"Gerhardt?" he asked, suddenly hesitant, and then he looked over to the corner: Their mother's bed was empty. "What have you done?"

Sonja shook her head. "Son, put the axe down."

"Mother...?" His first reaction was to wonder how it could be, and then he remembered that nothing in this forest followed the rules. His arm went lax, and the axe dangled in his grip.

"Put the axe down," she said more firmly.

He snapped back to awareness, though. "No, Mother." His fist firmed around the wooden handle.

She stepped toward him, and like Gerhardt had, she towered over him. He stood his ground. "Son, you love your mother. Do what's right."

"It's not right to let you kill."

"Put the axe down."

He held it in his hand, feeling the weight. He looked around the room, both calculating the swing and deciding whether it was the right thing to do.

"There are things in this world we can never take back, son."

Her current gentleness was in conflict with the barbarism she'd just engaged in, and Jakob stood frozen. Again. Always failing to take action, and that was something she'd taken advantage of time and time again.

*Damn you, Jakob!*

She stepped forward, and he could feel her heat against him, and the way that her chest and stomach were distended from Lorita's body, which was dissolving as she spoke.

*Action now, or action never!*

Before he had a chance to think about it again, he pushed her backwards. She was taken by surprise, falling onto her back. And then it was over in a flash: The axe came down, cleaving her skull in two. She didn't have the opportunity to scream or raise an arm to block the shot.

Jakob blinked, looking into the now-dead eyes of his mother. He wanted to cry, to mourn the moment, but he had to continue chopping, carefully opening her chest with the axe, and then tearing it apart with his hands.

Lorita, covered in gore, lay in a pool of blood and flesh.

He picked her up, not bothering to check for breath or heartbeat, only wanting to get her out of the acid as quickly as possible. Already, her skin had puckered and singed in places, although his mother must have been deliberately holding back. To make the digestion last longer.

He took a last look back at his mother's body, where it lay split and rent on the floor, before carrying Lorita to the stream that ran behind the house.

**Darkness gave way to pain, and then coldness, the chill of water rushing over her body.**

Lorita gasped, and then cried out.

When she opened her eyes, her gaze was met with that of Jakob.

"You're... alive." He seemed as shocked by that fact as she was.

"I think," she said, a rush of suppressed panicked reactions suddenly washing over her. She gasped and grabbed at the ground.

He set a hand on her shoulder. "It's over."

"What is?" Her mind replayed the last few minutes she remembered, a series of events she'd tried to erase. Then it all came back to her, and she curled up.

There were so many sensations rushing over her: The panic of what had happened, the relief of still being alive, the pain of her skin, the chill of the water, the desire to run or scream or whatever else it was that she should have done instead of curling up and crying when Sonja had attacked.

Sitting on the riverbank, Jakob pulled her out of the water and onto his lap, holding her still as she leaned into him. She realized suddenly that she was naked: Had she lost her clothes when Sonja had... she refused to give it a word... or was it when Jakob had brought her to be bathed? She find herself hoping it had been the latter: She thought about him

carefully removing her clothing, lovingly, patiently so as to not disturb her more than he needed to, and it brought her comfort.

He held her for a long time, until time seemed to not have a meaning anymore, until all that existed was the two of them on the bank of the stream.

Eventually, they'd pass into sleep.

Eventually, in the morning sun, they'd wake up again. He'd burn the house to ashes, letting the flames burn as they may into the wood. "Fire is cleansing," he'd say.

Eventually, they'd go back to Schönberg, and then beyond, to Berlin, or London, or Paris.

Eventually, they'd live happily ever after.

For now, though, it was the bank of the stream, her naked body pressed against him, wrapped in comforting love as she waited to cry.