

Believe Me When I Tell You

I'll say she was a witch, because she never gave me another word for it. But what Katerina was -- it was quieter, and more difficult.

For decades before Katerina came to the village of Halle, nestled in a forgotten corner of the Black Forest, there had not been enough food. The earth had lost its will to yield, and the need of our people called to her, she told me. She couldn't hold off the famine, but she could bake for us.

My first memories were of her cakes. Somehow there were always piles of them, steaming softly even in the sharpest winter cold. My father would let me choose one and I'd cup it in my hand, breathe it in for minutes before allowing myself to begin to eat it. I would make it last a whole hour -- or so it felt, then, and then I'd suck the thick icing from my fingertips, thumb to pinky. They had a power to warm, these cakes, and a spice that sang on the tongue long after I was done eating. Papa bought her bread, too, telling me it always stayed so much softer than Herr Finster's, and cost less. Sometimes, I noticed, when I was old enough to count, she wouldn't charge for my cake at all.

I looked forward to the trips to the market, not just because I loved the cakes, but because Katerina fascinated me. She wasn't a beautiful woman in strictest terms, her nose a little too broad, her blonde hair pulled back too tight from her face, and her body all sharp angles. It was the way she looked at me. Not the patiently tired smile the other adults used -- it felt deeper, as if she knew I was thinking valuable and interesting things. I wondered, sometimes, if my mother had been anything like her.

My stepmother wasn't. She loved my father fiercely and she could make him laugh a laugh that would fill the house. I think everything was dirtier before he married her, though it's difficult to remember, since I was only four. She brought some beautiful things with her, dresses her mother had made and books. At first she was kind to me, took me for walks and smoothed my hair before bed, even after the baby had begun to grow inside her.

But then the baby came out wrong, twisted and bluish and strange with two few limbs. I peered past the midwife's legs at it and wish, still, that I hadn't. The midwife told my stepmother that stillbirths like this came of an evil influence in the house, and her eyes rested on me.

Perhaps because I talked too little, preferred the company of books to other children, had the habit of staring at things to try to understand them. Perhaps because I wasn't her child, but came from some other woman who would always be first. But after that day, there were no more cakes for me. My father bought them for my stepmother instead, saying she needed them more. I supposed this was true. She would not leave her bed, and the noise of her grief was terrible -- worse, if she caught sight of me. Papa told me to be patient, that I was strong and she was delicate and in more pain than I could imagine. When Papa was not trying to keep up with the villagers' need for wood, as the world descended into winter, he was at her side. I grew silent and faded into the corners of the house, running my fingers over the illustrations in my stepmother's books, which now felt like my own. The castles and men on horseback had started to feel more real to me than this house.

And then another baby began to grow. Papa said wasn't it time that I went out and played with the other children in the snow? I knew what this meant, of course -- my stepmother was convinced I'd cause a second death. Part of me even believed that I could be responsible. I hadn't spoken any enchantments like the ones in the books that the witches used to curse the heroes, but I wondered if maybe I didn't even need to, if there was something wrong and broken inside me. So I went out.

For days I wandered on the fringes of the knot of children, but I could never find away in, and they seemed always to have their backs to me, always moving away from me. Their mothers and fathers had likely told them to avoid me, and they seemed more than happy to obey. Finally, I gave it up. I cried in the woods, my back against the cold bark of a tree, wishing I had thought to at least bring my books with me, but afraid to go home to get them until dinner. I wanted Papa to think that I was being good.

And then I saw Katerina. When she entered the trees, empty basket swinging, I padded after her, without really understanding why I had chosen to. On the way, I gathered some pebbles I thought looked enough like the coins she accepted, keeping my eyes and ears fixed on her as I dodged from tree to tree. I was a wolf, I was a hunter, I was a knight, I was all the heroes from my books in one.

She lived in a stone hut nestled into a clearing. I stood for a moment in front of the bright blue door, wondering if I could even knock, wondering if this made me a beggar, and then the door swung open.

"I've been expecting you, Greta," she said. The kindness in her voice was palpable. She sat me down at a small wooden table and presented me with a plate full of cakes. "Smart girls need good food. And company."

I stayed silent at first, afraid all my words would be the wrong ones. But the sweet dough seemed to loosen something in my throat. I hadn't realized how hungry I had been for weeks, but now my mouth was full of lemon and honey and ginger, each flavor chasing the next and making my body feel as if it were learning to glow.

"You're unhappy," she said. "Tell me about it. It'll help."

I told her about the way the house had become dark and unwelcome to me, about Papa sending me out. "I don't want to make this baby come out wrong," I said. "Please tell me what I can do." I was crying again, though I didn't mean to.

Katerina laid a hand on my shoulder. "You're not a witch," she said. "You couldn't do anything evil if you tried. Trust me. I know these things."

I took a deep shuddering breath. I hadn't realized how badly I'd needed to hear that, from someone. But I needed to be sure. "What happened to the baby, then?"

She sighed. "What happens to many babies. He wasn't able to breathe as he left the womb. An entirely natural occurrence, I'm afraid." She paused, thoughtful. "I could have saved him, maybe, but I don't like to interfere with when death decides to come."

"So you can do magic," I said. I should have been frightened, but I wasn't. I noticed, then, that I hadn't given her the small gift I'd gathered for her. "Here. I'm sorry, I couldn't bring any money for the food." I extended the pebbles I'd gathered to her, which had grown hot in my clenched fist. She took them.

"I appreciate your gift, but you don't ever need to pay," she said. "Would you like to see some real magic, Greta?"

I nodded and followed her to the door. She leaned out and breathed upon the pebbles, and they flew from her palm, multiplying in the air into a luminous cloud. Then

they settled, one by one, into two lines, shining silver as moonlight. “So you can find your way back here. A path only you can see. “

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I continued to see Katerina as the new child rounded out my stepmother’s stomach, and kept coming after Hans emerged screaming but healthy. No one seemed to mind that I spent most of my days away, and no one asked me where I went. No doubt my stepmother, at least, attributed the baby’s wellbeing to my absence.

“Why do you bake for the villagers?” I asked Katerina one day.

“When there’s not much happiness to go around,” she said, her hands deep in dough, “this will do.”

From one sack of flour she could pull loaves upon loaves of bread, and batches upon batches of sweets and pastries. “I can’t make something of nothing,” she said, “but I can stretch something as far as it will go.” And she poured power into it, called it adding “just a bit extra.” I felt it in everything she baked -- it opened something warm inside of me, sustained me for longer than regular food. I watched carefully as she poured ingredients together, worked the mixture with her capable hands, eased the stone slabs into the huge oven that squatted in the corner of her cabin, always breathing heat. I expected to see sparks fly from her fingertips, or to catch her mumbling spells or invoking the spirits of tastiness or something , but I never did.

“That’s not how it works,” she laughed. “All of that is a load of nonsense storytellers made up to be dramatic.” No magic came without a price, however. After she was done baking, she was often weak and needed me to lead her to the bed so she could rest. The rose in her face would fade to a sickly yellow, and only returned after she

had spent time recovering her strength. Though she was reluctant to admit any suffering to me, I eventually learned about the headaches that felt as if a chisel worked its way into her skull. Occasionally she would shiver and convulse violently on the bed, tell me to leave so she wouldn't frighten me. It did frighten me, but I stayed. I would sit in one of the wooden chairs and read to her from one of her fabulous books about history or plants. I didn't understand much of what I read, but I felt I was beginning to absorb more and more of the world. My presence soothed her, she said, and she would correct my pronunciation through chattering teeth.

The aches and weakness were not the only price. Since she poured what power she had into the food she made, her body could never support a life other than hers. "I never intended to have children, though," she said. "The whole process, start to finish, is terribly messy."

"I don't want any either," I told her. I was eight by this time, and had made my way through Katerina's books on anatomy, understood that the human body was a delicate collection of bags and pouches for fluid. I didn't like the idea of another being pushing all of that around inside me. And, even more, I'd experienced enough of Hans's tantrums, wailing, and careless destruction to be convinced that if the devil existed, infants and toddlers were his doing. Just that day, he had become interested in one of my books and snatched it from me, ripping the pages out with alarming dexterity. I was not, my stepmother said, allowed to take it back, but should let him have his way with the stories that had become my companions. "I want to be like you," I told Katerina.

She rested her hands on my shoulders. “There’s no magic in you -- it’s rare, and not always a gift. But that doesn’t mean you need to become a wife and a mother, if that isn’t what you want. There are other paths.”

I barely heard her. I had believed, for the years I had come to see her, that I could learn to make beautiful and powerful things. That I could use magic to send my stepmother and Hans somewhere else -- not anywhere bad, of course, or even particularly cold. But I wanted the half-remembered times back when Papa held onto me like I was all he had, because I was. I realized then how much I had been relying on Katerina to give me some power over my life.

“I know this is disappointing,” she said. “But you can be like me in other ways.”

I cried that night, trying to muffle the sound with my blankets. I must have made more noise than I thought, because Hans wobbled in and held his hands out to me, a serious look of concern on his pudgy face. “Sad?” he said.

“Yes,” I said. This was the first time he’d come to me, willingly. My stepmother didn’t like me getting too near him, and Papa had long ago given up trying to tell her what was best for their child. Hans must have come all the way from their bedroom to comfort me. I helped him onto the bed and he snuggled his body against mine. His breath was warm and smelled nice.

“This will be our secret,” I said.

“Secret,” he said, and put a finger to his lips.

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When he was old enough to stray out of my stepmother's gaze long enough, I would bring him with me to see Katerina. At first, I didn't like the thought of losing what had become my own personal retreat, but Katerina insisted.

She would set up a picnic for us in the grass outside her house, which was velvety and lush. She could call squirrels and rabbits to her, and Hans had a way with them, luring them close enough so he could run his fingers through their coats. They never seemed to want to get near enough to me.

"They sense the wolf in you," Katerina told me, which comforted and scared me.

Hans could never stay long, but I had started to see him not as a creature that ate, shit, and made noise, but as a brother. I would tickle his feet with blades of grass and he wove clover into my hair.

It was during one of my visits without Hans, however, when the baker came for the first time.

No doubt she threatened his business, which he had in the past years inherited from his father, to the point of dissolution. Of course his breads were hearty and absorbed the thin soups the villagers drew from roots and the occasional chicken, but they were not Katerina's. And Katerina charged little or nothing for hers.

When Herr Finster came, he was holding a bunch of wildflowers, some of which I recognized as the sort that could make you itch. When he handed them over I could see the angry welts on his palms. Katerina proffered a jar for them, politely, and listened, just as politely, as he confessed his undying devotion to her and requested that she become his wife.

“You don’t want me as a wife,” she said, “and I don’t want you as a husband.”

This surprised him so much that his jaw seemed to dislodge, and it hung there for nearly minute before he got it working again. “You have no husband, and your life is lonely. I could protect and provide for you.”

“No, you couldn’t,” she said. “I provide for myself, and you’re only asking me because you want me to stop baking, or else bake for you and charge your prices and give you my earnings.” This was clearly the truth, from the way Herr Finster’s jaw took this accusation. “As for lonely -- I’m never lonely. No sensible person ever is.”

This last phrase was one she repeated often, and it had never made so much sense. Katerina reached over and turned Herr Finster’s shoulders in the direction of the door, gently, and guided him out. “Thank you for the flowers,” she said.

As soon as the branches obscured his grey coat, I began laughing. “That man is ridiculous,” I said when I could draw breath, and realized Katerina had not laughed.

“Not ridiculous. Sad, and desperate. And for all of that, dangerous.”

Herr Finster, Katerina told me, never even wanted to be a baker. He wanted to travel, to see mountains and the ocean, but his father didn’t have patience for imagination or ambition. He would beat Herr Finster when he caught him looking out the window instead of grinding the wheat or watching the oven. And finally, his father seemed to have beaten the desire to be anything but a baker from Herr Finster, and, when he died, left the business and a lifetime of bitterness as a legacy. I didn’t ask how Katerina could know this, only having lived in the village for five years. She made a point to know anything worth knowing, she told me.

She returned to kneading bread. “I don’t think this will be the end of things.”

In the following days, Herr Finster came twice more to beg for Katerina's hand, and twice more she denied him. The second time, she was quiet and calm, told him that if he wanted to stay in business he ought to charge no more than the villagers could pay, in these difficult times. Or perhaps he ought to find a trade that suited him better, his father -- may he rest in peace -- being a year in the ground. At this he became angry, slamming the door to behind him so that the beams of the house trembled. He brought the same anger the third time he came -- Katerina and I could feel it like a wave before him. As he entered I picked up a knife used for cutting patterns in the dough. I wasn't sure what I would do with it, but I wanted to be prepared.

He told Katerina that this was his final offer, and that if she didn't accept he would see to it that she never baked again. At this she at last lost her practiced calm. She seemed to grow taller in front of him and her voice resonated with inexorable command.

"Out," she said. "You will not come back."

I never found her so lovely as she was in this moment. Her blonde hair was saturated with light, her able hands pregnant with power. I didn't even notice him leave. When she turned to me, her eyes were still bright, but they seemed to look beyond me.

"I've overextended myself," she said, her voice suddenly light as a husk. "I've told you before that there's always a price. For warding him off, I seem to have exchanged my sight. There's no telling for how long." She smiled a little. "I don't regret it, even if I should. He'll have to run the whole way home, and he'll never be able to find this place again." She extended a hand to me with the faith I would take it. It was dry and cool, still coated in flour. I led her to a chair. Her body felt nearly weightless

against mine, as if her skin held only air. Her absent eyes troubled me, too, but at least my face wouldn't show this to her. "I think I may be done baking for today," she said.

Katerina sent me home shortly after Herr Finster left, saying she needed rest and quiet. It was dark by the time I reached Halle, and I felt immediately that something was wrong. A meeting fire burned in the square, and the dark backs of most of the village crowded around it. The shouting voices were thick with anger. And then I recognized Herr Finster's voice, above the rest.

"We've all been deceived," he cried. "There has been a witch in our midst all along, and she's been using her cakes and pastries to control us. Don't you feel different every time you eat them? That's her dark magic working on you."

The crowd murmured an assent.

"She's trying to turn us all to the devil!"

My legs were shaking, but I pushed my way through the dense bodies. I needed to stop him, tell the village what he was doing.

"I felt her evil on me just now -- " He broke off, seeing me. "There! This girl is her pawn. The witch has already turned her." He pointed a thick finger at me, and the collective gaze shifted, bore into me.

"So that's where she's been going. I should have known." My stepmother's voice, cold as metal. "This girl caused my first baby to be born dead."

"She learned the evil arts from the witch," Herr Finster said, his voice gaining strength. "Speak, girl. Confess your crimes and perhaps it's not too late to find salvation."

“I haven’t committed any crimes,” I said. I wanted the words to come out powerful, but my voice was shrill and small. My whole body was shaking now, and terribly cold, despite the fire just feet from me. “She only tries to help you.”

“See how far her spirit is bent,” Herr Finster said. “Sh’ll do the same to all of your children, if you let her.”

“No!” A small voice, Hans’s. I tried to find his face, communicate to him with my eyes that he should stop. “Katerina is good. She lets me pet the squirrels.”

“See? See?” Herr Finster had reached a new height of ecstatic rage, and the people around the fire seemed to catch his energy.

I think it was my stepmother’s voice that started the chant.

“Death to the witch.”

“Death.”

“Death.”

“Death.”

The crowd swelled around me, and I knew I’d be trampled. And then I felt broad hands around my waist, lifting me into the air. At first I struggled, flailing my arms and legs to try to get free, but then I saw Papa’s bearded face.

“I’m sorry,” he spoke into my ear. “If I had just -- well, it’s too late for that now. You’re not safe.”

He brought me to the edge of the woods, set me in the hollow of a tree. “Stay here,” he said. “Don’t move. I’ll come back to get you, when it’s done.”

“Papa,” I said. “You don’t believe them, do you?”

He paused, looked down at me for a long moment. “I believe that you’re my daughter, and can still be saved.” And then he was gone, his large strides eating up the earth.

Saved. I needed to warn Katerina. If I ran, I could get there before -- before they came for her. From here, I could see the faint glow of the path. I let my fear carry me.

I had expected to need to shake Katerina awake, but she was sitting in the wooden chair I usually stood on when I helped her with the dough. Her hands were folded, her blind eyes open.

“Greta,” she said. Her voice was hoarse with sadness. “Greta, you need to leave. Now.”

But we could both hear the tromp of footsteps, coming closer. “I’m staying.” I took one of her hands, tried to push some warmth into it.

“This isn’t a lesson you’re ready for yet,” she said. “If you won’t go, you must hide.” I felt myself lifted, again, but this time with invisible hands, and brought gently to the bed, my legs folded gently as I was tucked beneath the frame.

And then the air was alive with the sound of wood splintering, falling. She’d done nothing to stop them. I peered out to see her still perched on the chair, head slanting slightly to the left as if mildly interested. I tried to spring up, to push myself between her and these men, their faces evil, dark angles in the light from their torches, tools of their trades held like weapons. But I couldn’t move, couldn’t even speak. She’d put a spell on me -- it seemed as if invisible arms held me back, not cruelly but firmly, as if flour caked my throat into silence. I watched from beneath the bed as they grabbed her, screamed accusations in her face. I thought she would blast them away, use the power I’d seen

earlier -- surely she more than matched them. I recognized the chandler, the smith, and then -- my Papa. He barely looked like Papa, his features twisted by the light. I tried again to scream. They were forcing Katerina to stand, now, and still she was calm, resigned.

“Witch,” Papa spat in her face.

“I am,” she said.

This seemed to first surprise, then incense the men. “No need for a trial, then,” Papa said. The other men nodded. “For the sake of my children, let’s burn her right here, in her own oven.”

The men roared their assent, used their torches to encourage the fire that had browned bread and cakes that had sustained and delighted them and their families. I could feel the heat on my face, and I struggled against my invisible bonds as I watched the hands lift her, carry her over and feed her, placid and silent, feet-first into the flames. She didn’t cry out as her legs were consumed. I saw her face, lit orange, beautiful and set, already elsewhere. I made one more desperate bid to get to her in time to save some part of her, to keep the life from burning out of her, but it was useless. I closed my eyes -- I couldn’t bear to see any more. The smell was terrible, and it beat at me. I couldn’t shut it out. Papa and the others were shouting, encouraging each other to keep going, to see the witch dead, but their voices had begun to sound strained. Even they, it seemed, were horrified by what they were doing to this woman who remained quiet. Time stretched impossibly and the air grew thick with the smoke made of flesh, cloth, and hair. I was breathing her in, what was left of Katerina, choking on her but wanting something of her to hold onto.

Finally, I heard the floor shift under the weight of retreating boots. They were singing, now, a hymn about God's salvation. Their voices were rough and ugly around the pious words. Papa's voice. Papa's words. Papa's hands, around Katerina. I heard the song long after they'd left. Perhaps it was in my head, echoing around. I opened my eyes, felt the ownership of my limbs and voice return, but, seeing what was left of Katerina's ruined body, I'd lost the will to use them.

I didn't believe it at first, thought maybe she could rise from the ashes like the phoenix I had read about. For hours I kept vigil, begged the black remains, perhaps even prayed. It's difficult to remember.

A sharp sound in the woods brought me back. I peered out the window, expecting to see torches again, but it was just a fox. I looked in the direction of the village. The stone-lights Katerina had made for me had stopped glowing, and it would be difficult for me to find my way back. But I couldn't go home to Papa. That name seemed wrong now-- I no longer felt connected to him, and perhaps never had been. They might burn me, too, once they found me. It was something Papa could do. I had seen it.

And then I saw a small pile of boy's clothes, folded neatly on the baking table. When put them on, my skin began to tingle, to shift, to move to fit the clothes. I clapped a palm to my head to feel my hair growing shorter and my cheekbones becoming sharper and more prominent. I was rising slightly higher from the ground, could feel my bones stretching, and something had changed, too, between my legs. And then the tingling was gone, and my body felt cool, as if dipped in fresh water.

With a shaking hand, I lifted the small mirror on the table. A boy back looked at me, open-mouthed and frightened. I looked away, and then back, feeling dizzy and sick. I tried to take deep breaths. This had to be Katerina's doing, and I needed to be calm, to understand what she wanted me to do. Then the mirror was filled with words, written in Katerina's neat hand: *As long as you have a single item of this clothing on, you will be a man. I'm afraid this is necessary for you to be safe. I hope there will come a day when you won't need them anymore. Now go. And take some bread with you.*

I felt better, steadier, knowing that the change wasn't permanent, that this was Katerina's gift to me. She'd given me power over my life after all, a power I couldn't have imagined. I looked back at the reflection in the mirror. This was a new face. This face hadn't seen a woman burned. This face didn't have a father. This face wouldn't be leaving behind a brother, didn't have my memories. This face could leave it all, could look only forward.

It was better to have this face.

For now.