

from *H & G*

The sticky stuff

The candy gets on the inside because we eat it and eat it like thieves, like children under the great burr of clouds made by a god in a slothful mood.

The candy gets on the outside and sticks like tragedy, marking us as the worst type of person. It sticks like the worst time.

What was the worst time? We can't remember it, but we can feel it like a smear of embers inside our small chests.

The worst time was when G. had to push the Witch.

The worst time was when Father left us in the woods with nothing but crumbs and stones.

The worst time was when he did it again, and we knew he was lying.

The worst time was when Mother died and everything after that.

We remember everything of course. We're broken, not naive.

We remember the sharp wind moving the yellow leaves across the Woods as we walked on and on looking for nothing, though we were very hungry and cold and felt a new bad feeling, a sticky burning that kept us moving. Then we ate the candy and could not stop eating.

The worst time was when the Witch gripped H.'s hand and told him to stop eating.

The worst time was hearing the Witch screaming, though she had wanted to kill us and eat us.

Other things stick to the candy, such as other adults' remarks about our greediness and astonishing cruelty. We should be more forgiving like normal children they say. Those remarks stick because we don't know who they belong to—them or us—and sometimes we don't know if the words are on the outside or not.

Was it Freud who said,

“Everything in the world is about sex except sex. Sex is about power,” or some other canny adult male who knew something about the practice of sex as power, knew it as observer, abettor, or serial perpetrator?

The difference between the pervert and the moral human is self-pity. The moral human can at some point say, “I did it. I did those disgusting things.” The pervert exerts his power through complaint fueled by a bottomless belief in his victimization, the irreparable injustices done to him or her by a society that never got him.

The pervert—more than the victims and more than any ordinary woman or man—needs to believe that she is a good person, an immaculate person who has never done harm to anyone. She is crushed and surprised by the anger of her victims, from whom she expects gratitude as well as acquiescence.

All the facts have escaped her from the beginning:

- i. The fact that the child will inevitably grow up to be an adult surpassing her in strength and ability.
- ii. The fact that there is no statute of limitation on revenge.
- iii. The fact that she will be an old woman someday, no longer valued in the world for her prowess, her extraordinary gifts.

He will not see that power, that ineluctable sweet, has congealed, sealing him in. After years of self-blame for being in the wrong place at the right time, the grown child will replace the golden mirror with an ordinary glass, holding it up for all the world to see.

Dream song 218 / G.

“Most women,” said the older, shaggy-haired man with graying curls, “don’t have style, but *you*”—he paused to look directly at Gretel—“you are beautiful, and I hope I always feel this way.”

Gretel found this statement horribly disturbing, coming from a man she thought was her mentor. It was like being told she was attractive by a male therapist after telling him the whole sordid story of abandonment, narrowly avoided cannibalism, and her brother’s helplessness, and the statement instantly turned the dinner into a weird date. Had she been so naive again? How was this possible for someone like her, a survivor if there ever was one and someone who had had the luxury of cluelessness regarding caretakers’ intentions stripped away long, long ago?

She did not like the emphasis on her physical person in this context, and she especially did not like the privileging of *his* assessment of her outward style above any of her opinions. The therapist had been real—a couples’ counselor she had seen with her ex-boyfriend in her twenties—but this smiling man with the gray curls, an established writer who had taken her under his golden wing, was a simulacrum like the dreamed-into-being gods of fire and mud in a modern tale. He was a figure of her own invention—a messenger from her own mind—so what, if anything, was he trying to convey? This old-school control King, this benevolent, pernicious, sexist lech embedded in her own recesses, her own will?

He was a man known for his wit. And this was a reminder, a joke about her rapacious, usurious attitude toward her “style,” which depended partly on being different from other women, women who hadn’t had to kill the Witch, women and men who never had to choose between their own lives and someone else’s. Gretel had defended herself and saved her bewildered brother, but often it didn’t feel that way. Often, she felt like she had no hands to hold fast the door and keep the Witch in. Too often, the Witch with her gray curls would rise again in different guise like a wolf in well-meaning skin.

G. is walking up the hill

with her alert mind and ordinary breasts, which are neither large nor magically self-renewing. Having no particular destination in mind and no home to go back to, having divested herself of her few possessions, and having trained all desires but the most monstrously immediate out of herself over three decades, not through some philosophical determination to be good but rather through an overriding desire to not feel any more disappointment, that candy house of pain with its seemingly ever-regenerating shoots of twisted gingerbread and spice: her Father/Stepmother packing her and her brother off into the wild woods, Stepmother's hard, hypocritical smile, which only an idiot like their Father would fall for (again and again), the axe in the tree rigged explicitly to fool them into continuing on by themselves deeper into the Enchanted Woods, the fact that they found the sound of an axe comforting.

When G. thinks of herself and H., she refers to the two of them as "we," embracing the booby prize of language for real experience. She knows that she can say *we, we, we* all she wants, but the fact will remain that it's her and just her, because H. was helpless the second he crossed the threshold of the Witch's house and equally helpless in the face of their Father's betrayal. H. could never see that at the very least, their Father had agreed to cast them out to be eaten by wolves or boars or a Witch. H. could never get mad at their Father; he blamed it all on their Stepmother, conveniently dead upon their arrival back at the cottage.

For a while, G. too had thought it could be all right, as their Father had promised never to lie to them again. But within a year he had remarried, as he was a man who could not live without a wife. G. remembers her Father the Woodsman struggling to open a can of potted meat, and she remembers impatiently doing it for him, disgusted and knowing then that it would just be a matter of time before he found a second replacement for their Mother.

The third wife was younger than the others, still slightly plump with youthful excess and soon pregnant with their half-brother. As far as G. knew, their new Stepmother never proposed expelling H. and herself from the cottage, but then they had learned to need so little, gratefully eating the bland root soup she made nearly every night, grateful for the straw beds, the roof made of slate, the walls made of stone, the door made of pine. The windows, of course, were made of glass. G. tested

them daily, licking each pane to make sure it hadn't turned into sugar. She would have rapped them out, if she'd had the nerve, which she did not.

As it was, she simply didn't last long in that solid house. Like the other wives, their new Stepmother had full sway over their Father, and she simply did not like H. and G. To all appearances, the new Stepmother was competent and neutral and she was attentive when they were ill—who knows why, but H. was ecstatic when she put a cool cloth on his forehead and fed him broth made from chicken bones and peas. G. was very rarely sick and not so easy to help even then—especially then, so great was her hunger, equal to her enormous distrust of all persons charged with her and her brother's well-being.

So impoverished was G.'s ability to overcome these obstacles, which, after an age, she could perceive and feel as boulders in her pockets. She could not cast those stones out upon the forest floor. Those she instead took across the Sea with her through all her wanderings.

Three kinds of desire

- (1) “Tell me I’m *the* fairest; tell me I’m your number one,” said the Witch to H. “Tell me this, and I will leave you alone,” she entreated, embarrassed by this most unoccult request, but after four or five whiskeys the plea came out. After centuries of power, she was still bad at holding her liquor.

H. looked concerned, a look that instantly devastated and enraged the Witch. “Well, I, well, I, well, I,” said H.

“Forget it,” said the Witch.

Later that night, alone in her quarters, the Witch gazed at her small black mirror and tried to write “You are a coward” over and over, but she was too far gone to write legibly.

- (2) “More pie, please,” said H., mouth full of cream. He held his knife with the left hand, the fork with his right, very precisely, self-consciously, as if he had been trained at an advanced but still impressionable age.

- (3) Even in middle age, G. missed having a Mother. She had not had a parent who needed less than she did. Her Father and Stepmother had been traumatized by the wars that had ravaged the Enchanted Woods when they were growing up, and both had lost their Mothers in childhood. Like her own biological Mother, G.’s Stepmother’s Mother had died in childbirth, giving birth in an alpine field alone with the rotting apples and ants for company.

Her Father’s Mother had died when her Father was nine. A beauty with long black hair, unhappily married to G.’s Grandfather, a mountain farmer who cared more about the potency of his crops than about his wife and son. G.’s Grandmother sat outside their cottage reading storybooks to her adoring child, smoking cigarettes, and drinking cherry wine until she died her untimely death, abandoning her son who never forgave her or his Father.

A gorgeous rainy day...

I make these ugly marks on the calendar, a slash through another day lived. Why do it? But then, as the saying goes, why do anything?

Why not make something ugly or beautiful; it's a gorgeous rainy day, misting, and there are thousands of shades of gray, my favorite color, out there through my window.

October is a hunched bird with a small head, black lips around a red egg. The egg, the lips, the tiny head made of cells the shape of feathers.

I died in just this way: as an egg with no shell, swallowed by lips the color of Spanish slugs, the color of rancid honey, wrapped in a thousand decisive strokes.

I died the way I was born: first me, pop! and then another.

The water today is a beautiful gray-dark green like malachite morning ripple by wave, like the sound of sugar in the Witch's throat.

I did not hate her.

Unlike the others, she had the decency to be straight with us.

"I'd like to eat you," she said. "As soon as that boy is as plump as a *to-mah-to*."

Maybe I did hate her. Even at the age of six, I'd found inconsistent assumed accents extremely irritating. And where did she learn such pretensions, living alone, blind from cataracts, in those desolate woods with nothing better to do than to build that delectable house? How long did she labor?

"Seven years," she said. "Seven years of daily conjuring—willing this *luhhr* into being."

—milky caramel

—hard peppermint—

shiny black chocolate—

—vanilla crème—

violet gumdrops—

marzipan fruit—

I would have felt sorry for her if she hadn't been so grotesque, so hard to look at and so full of justified outrage, complaining about everything from the weather to a neighbor cutting down a tree between their houses.

“Too much sun now!” she declared. “It will melt my windows!” The windows *were* a marvel: intricate, brightly colored, hard-candy panes set like the rose windows in Gothic cathedrals.

The Witch often bemoaned our nation’s ongoing war with X_____, a small, oil-rich country across The White Sea. We had been an oil-rich country once, but by the time H. and I were born, the oil and most of the people had gone. Food and heat were in short supply throughout the Enchanted Woods. “They’ve been bombing those innocent people for decades. We’ve never stopped bombing them,” she would say, looking up from the daily paper.

Like I said, her grievances were mostly justified, and they were deployed in a steady rotation. She grumbled, of course, about the constant drizzle, like all the other adults. The injustice that seemed to rankle her the most, though, was that the locals had never warmed to her. She had lived in the Enchanted Woods for twelve years, attending municipal meetings, contributing opinion pieces to the papers, giving money to the Women’s Craft Council, and donating her own esteemed sculptures to the town. She had been a model citizen, and she was the only craftsperson in the Woods whose work was nationally known.

“I cannot tell you how many times I’ve met people in this town for a perfectly pleasant cup of coffee, and that’s the end of it,” she would begin.

At that time, I had lived in the Woods all my young life, so I would just nod or say something like, “We go to sleep early here. Most adults don’t leave their houses much.”

Such niceties would assuage the Witch for a little while, but inevitably I would burn a pie or let the soup boil over or fail in one of the many other domestic duties I had been charged with. By the time I pushed her in the oven, I was doing all the cooking, cleaning, and yard work, so that the Witch could be free to concentrate on what she called her real work: building another candy house like the one H. and I had set upon and were entrapped by.

She had a studio lined with cedar, cork, and candy canes in the back of the house, and in that studio she was building a tiny model of her new child trap. Almost finished, it looked exactly like the one we lived in. Every now and then, or rather, every day at noon, she would emerge from the studio screaming.

“Aaaaarrrrrgh!”

“What?” I said the first time it happened. “Is it the rain again? The Fowler says it’s supposed to be sunny by mid-afternoon.”

“No!” said the Witch. “And I don’t care about what the Fowler says. It’s this damn project. I feel like I’m not learning anything new; it’s all old familiar turf. I’m bored with these issues, and it’s not coming together.”

“Oh,” I said. “Why do you do it?”

“Because I have to,” said the Witch distractedly, bony fingers running through her supernaturally blond hair. She stared at me with her pale eyes and added, “You would like for me to abandon the project, wouldn’t you? The way you were abandoned by your pathetic parents. I’m going to build that house, and as soon as I do, I’m going to eat your brother, *scrahwny* or not. And don’t think you’ll be the last children I consume.”

She stormed back into the studio, where I could hear her listening to the news on the radio and talking to her cats, Vie and Die, fraternal twins like me and H. I went back to scrubbing the cauldrons, which hadn’t been cleaned in years.

By the time I shoved her into the spotless oven, I’d heard everything about the Witch’s life at least three times, or at least everything that she remembered at the advanced age she was—42? 109? Or everything terrible enough to tell.

How her parents would beat her mercilessly if she failed to make the floors shine like mirrors or if she got a bad grade. How she had excelled at the Burgher’s College, mastering both the arts and sciences. How her best friend had lost an arm in a terrible lab fire. How she had been the only woman admitted to the Institute of Culinary Rheology and Design, which she had dropped out of after a year, so severe was the sexual harassment. How her younger sister, often mistaken for the glamorous Queen of E_____, had died long ago after being committed to a cottage for the insane.

Apparently, the Witch too had been attractive, though as I said, by the time H. and I met her, she was difficult to look at. She was terribly thin from a strict diet (most of the food I made was thrown out), and though her skin was smooth, it was covered with spots, which she attributed to her having repeatedly taken a magical pill to please an old boyfriend whose preferences I also learned too much about during that interminable period, which seemed like years, but in reality had only lasted a few weeks—seven to be exact, which seems incredible to me now but perhaps tells you something about the nature of enchantment.

You may also have noticed that the Witch had neighbors, right next door—close enough to cut down her favorite tree. H. and I could have run to those neighbors for help at any time during our imprisonment,

but we did not, though we knew well that the Witch wanted to kill us and eat us.

But you have to remember a few things:

- (1) This was an enchanted house, enchanted not least by the fact that at least one of us was being fed and fed very well, first by the Witch herself, an especially good pastry chef, and then by me, then as ever a quick study.
- (2) We had arrived starving and abandoned by our beloved Father and innocuous-seeming Stepmother not once but twice. Though cruel, the Witch was direct about her intentions, and the neighbors would very likely have returned us to our original abandoners, who would have very likely turned us out again.
- (3) I for one was not totally convinced that the Witch would kill us. She seemed to be enjoying complaining and threatening and yelling at us so much, and she was so easily fooled by the chicken bone I held out each night in lieu of H.'s arm. "Haaaach!" she'd hiss like her cat Vie. "Still so skinny!"

I kept the house in order while she raged about and pretended to work. She had someone to tell her worst stories to, dumb kids she was going to eat, two helpless rejects who had been wandering homeless in the woods. No one could have been a better ear, and those revolting secrets would be safe, sailing with us to the grave or staying within the candy house's four walls. Or so she must have thought in that sharp, deluded mind—sharpened and beclouded by decades of experience that reaffirmed her preset notions, as experience tends to do.

I shoved her into that oven because I instinctively knew that it would be the end of something that I had already felt working around me like a fog or a cloud of smoke—a pattern, in the old parlance. I killed her because I didn't want to hear another heroic or awful story from those vehement lips, another woe—rational or ludicrous—from this person who could not break the habit of malice in spite of her extraordinary powers. This person who could have been my hero and our savior but who was instead another cautionary tale—another sad fate to avoid.

Baked Witch

G. had gotten what she let herself want:
a roof over her head,
a warm place to sleep,
nice but irritating cottagemates too wrapped up in their own problems
to bother much with her well- or ill-being

No time to talk about your feelings, G. So your parents abandoned you and the Witch tried to eat you and your brother was and remains useless. They don't miss you; they're better off without you, but they let you feel like you were the bad one, leaving. They only ever wanted H., the good one, the fat one, the boy. Try to be nicer to everyone you meet. Chop some wood for the Woodsman, shoot some birds for the Fowler, shoot something else for the Huntsman. They have children. They're too busy.

When you get tired of holding up the culture—you and your loserly single friends—you can go back to your hole, which is what you can afford, since you spent all that time making things other than bread, meat, and silver. What exactly were you doing?

Fixing yourself?

Getting “clean”?

You never were the grateful type. Biting all those hands that fed you.

G.'s rebuttal: Well.

Well, the rhetoric of hate remains alive and well within me and without. I'm certainly not the only person in or outside of the Enchanted Woods who feels this way, no matter how bewildered you act. I've taken great care to spare future victims by not marrying, not having children, and not telling people what complete fucking idiots they are. But I believe you.

I am so disgusting, so intrinsically repulsive. You are correct: no one wants a woman who walks away from misery. And all my stories are fading away from me anyway—I can barely remember what or where I was last month, and if this damn trauma is lodged in my ugly, broken body—in my shoulder, my neck, my aching foot—so be it, too. I can't fix this. With all my heart and all my naïveté and all my wood and all my mind. Like a bad apple, that poison's here to stay.

There's no fix for my loserlyness, but there is an endless supply of it as long as I may live. Like my own nurse, all I can do is adjust the pillows

and make myself a little more comfortable in this terminal lameness,
administering the equivalent of a morphine drip, which would be—this:

sex
aggression
writing
music
dance
art
acupuncture
movies
travel
feng shui
massage
chatting
chanting
running
swimmingyoga
astrology
the great and terrible stories