

The Werewolf (1979)

By Angela Carter (England)

It is a northern country; they have cold weather, they have cold hearts. Cold; tempest; wild beasts in the forest. It is a hard life. Their houses are built of logs, dark and smoky within. There will be a crude icon¹ of the virgin behind a guttering² candle, the leg of a pig hung up to cure³, a string of drying mushrooms. A bed, a stool, a table. Harsh, brief, poor lives. To these upland woodsmen, the Devil is as real as you or I. More so;



Angela Carter
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they have not seen us nor even know that we exist, but the Devil they glimpse often in the graveyards, those bleak and touching townships of the dead where the graves are marked with portraits of the deceased in the naïf⁴ style and there are no flowers to put in front of them, no flowers grow there, so they put out small votive offerings⁵, little loaves, sometimes a cake that the bears come lumbering from the margins of the forests to snatch away. At midnight, especially on Walpurgisnacht⁶, the Devil holds picnics in the graveyards and invites the witches; then they dig up fresh corpses, and eat them. Anyone will tell you that. Wreaths of garlic on the doors keep out the vampires. A blue-eyed child born feet first on the night of St. John's Eve⁷ will have second sight. When they discover a witch-- some old woman whose cheeses ripen when her neighbours' do not, another old woman whose black cat, oh, sinister! *follows her about all the time*, they strip the crone, search for her marks, for the supernumerary nipple⁸ her familiar⁹ sucks. They soon find it. Then they stone her to death.

¹ a painting of a holy figure, used as an aid to devotion

² (of a candle or flame) flickering and burning unsteadily

³ the act or a method of preserving meat, fish, etc., by smoking, salting, or the like

⁴ variant of "naïve"

⁵ optional; not prescribed; having the nature of a voluntary offering

⁶ a traditional spring festival celebrated in large parts of Central and Northern Europe with dancing and bonfires; it is exactly six months from All Hallows' Eve

⁷ the evening of 23 June, St John's Eve, is the eve of celebration before the Feast Day of St John the Baptist

⁸ a third nipple (it occurs in approximately 1 in 18 males and 1 in 50 females); in folklore, an extra nipple was held to be indicative that the woman concerned was a witch, that the nipple was used to suckle the devil or familiar

Winter and cold weather.

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

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

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

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

The wolf let out a gulp, almost a sob, when it saw what had happened to it; wolves are less brave than they seem. It went lolloping off

disconsolately¹⁰ between the trees as well as it could on three legs, leaving a trail of blood behind it. The child wiped the blade of her knife clean on her apron, wrapped up the wolf's paw in the cloth in which her mother had packed the oatcakes and went on towards her grandmother's house. Soon it came on to snow so thickly that the path and any footsteps, track or spoor¹¹ that might have been upon it were obscured.

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

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



engraving from *The Book of Werewolves* (1865)

⁹ a demon supposedly attending a witch, often said to assume the form of an animal

¹⁰ in grief-stricken loneliness; without comforting circumstances or prospects

¹¹ the track or scent of an animal

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

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

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

