

# **An Ovel**

**by**

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## Once

Once upon a time, a long long time ago, when memories were not yet what they used to be and animals were still on speaking terms with humans, shortly before breakfast on the first day of January in the year nineteen-hundred-and-twelve. Once upon a time, in a place far far away, where every so often the sun would get up on the wrong side of the horizon and cats were taught to play chess, near Port Grenaugh in the parish of Santan in the sheading of Middle on the Isle of Man. Once upon a time, an illiterate printer's apprentice sat down to write a book.

Unable to read or write, he was naturally compelled to make extensive use of a dictionary in order to compile his book. Not surprisingly, the book ended up having no tangible plot, no compelling characters, no plausible narrative, no grand finale, no lofty ideas or intelligent monologue, nor any pictures or conversations. Writing a paragraph a day, twelve months later he had completed a cryptic three-hundred-and-sixty-six-paragraph novel, ending it with the most slippery of words, the least stressed, the weakest in the English language, a word which was not even a word, which barely sounded between the lips, a gasp, a mere nothing, the article a. He died less than a fortnight later.

His manuscript was soon lost. Some people simply assumed that it had fallen prey to the forces of nature, be they fire, water, wind or rats; others blamed themselves for the untimely loss. Rumours, however, circulated up the glen, telling of a beardless stranger, tall and pale and with a strong accent, who had wordlessly come and gone and ransacked his house, tearing every single page of every single notebook into small pieces.

A few days after his death, a young woman was sent from the village to tidy his house. She walked slowly up the hill to the top of the cliff and paused briefly near the grassy mound to catch her breath, gazing at the silt-and-pebble-strewn beach down to the right, at the southern tongue of the bay and the distant peninsula up ahead, at the grey wind-swept sea to the left. Then she turned about to face the stone cottage, opened the front door and crossed the threshold.

She looked round the main room, noting the half-opened door to the bedroom, the triangular chest of drawers under the stairs leading up to the loft, the broken chair, the smashed plates, the charred fireplace, the cracked windowpane. She righted the chair, picked up a broom, swept the hard clay floor, rested a moment, stuffed a piece of old cloth into the windowpane to stop the whistling wind, found a chipped cup, poured herself some water from the jug, sat down on the bench by the corner of the lopsided table, and burst into tears, her frail figure trembling with every whimper and sob.

After a few minutes she regained her composure, wiped her tears away, and lifted herself to continue. From under the table she dragged out a dirty brown blanket, the same blanket that they had taken with them on that Old May Day morning, less than two years before, when they had gone on that memorable outing all the way down to the sound and the calf, arriving there just ahead of the brightening dawn. She shook the dust off the blanket, folded it neatly and returned it to its proper place before walking over to the hearth.

Looking warily over her shoulder, she crouched by the fireplace, where one could only just imagine a hint of warmth still rising from the pile of white ashes. A small circular object was glinting near the top and she gently picked at it without breaking the pile, uncovering a single penny coin. She put her right hand into the top of her blouse and took out a white handkerchief that had been tucked away against her left breast, readily absorbing the scent of her recently-unwashed body. Holding the coin between her handkerchiefed fingers, she wiped it all sparkling clean, then laid it down on the nearby griddle, smiling to herself. Looking again over her shoulder, she took hold of the mantelshelf with her right hand and thrust her left arm all the way up into the bowels of the chimney, twisting her body and screwing her neck to reach just that much higher. When she retracted it, her left hand was holding a few sooty leaves of paper covered with tiny, dense, barely legible handwriting, as though whoever had written the thing was more anxious to scrape and save

on the delicate paper than to have others read it. The first four paragraphs of his unreadable book; all that was left.

Soon after, when she vanished from the foggy isle without a trace, more rumours resurfaced. It was said that she had been last sighted one cold January night, walking stark naked down to the beach and swimming away into the welcoming arms of a merman of the Irish Sea. In truth, she had indeed gone foreign, but by way of a rather more conventional means of transport, namely a steamer out of Douglas.

Over the next seven or eight years she would travel round a world torn apart by war and disease, dedicating herself to a mission the purpose of which only she could tell. She would take along the manuscript of the first four paragraphs, having cut it up into a dozen uneven parts. Being a seamstress and a bakeress, she would sew each part into one of thirteen different books, first circling a single word in each book. She would then leave the books and the snippets hidden inside at widely different places around the globe, from as far west as the western coast of the United States to as far east as Palestine and Siberia, to have them lead there a life and an afterlife of their own, one that could not be said to have had any lasting effect on the history of anyone or anything but herself.

## First

Fourteen dates and plums, slowly turning into stones, were lying in a shallow bowl by her right knee, enjoying the hesitant rays of an afternoon sun. Sitting cross-legged, with the small of her back propped against the whitewashed stones at the base of the tower, she leaned forward to lift a large wooden cube out of the heavy carpet-bag slouching in front of her. She laid the box to her left and pulled out its three drawers, each sliding out in a different direction for easy access to their contents.

The top drawer contained thirteen vials of ink, ten of which were filled with different amounts of liquid, each with its own colour, clarity and consistency, while three were still empty. The middle drawer contained thirteen pieces of gossamer paper, some cut into long thin strips fluttering in the breeze, others more square in shape, all covered with tiny letters in a faint black hand. The bottom drawer was simply a jumble of needles, pins, pens, nibs, bobbins, loose thread, a thimble, a pair of scissors, a curiously-shaped key, ribbons, buttons and what not.

She leaned forward once more to retrieve an olive-covered book from her bag, heaving a sigh and wiping her brow with the sleeve of her blouse. She opened the book about midway through and slowly leafed along, looking for the right page. When she found it, she placed the book on her right thigh and took out a pen from the bottom drawer. Picking up a vial filled with red liquid, she uncorked it, dipped the nib in, and wiped the excess fluid against the rim. Returning to the book, she held it steady with one hand and carefully marked a red circle round the word above.

Putting the book aside to let it dry, she gently rummaged through the bottom drawer to find a length of fine thread and a slightly-bent needle. Holding the needle up against the bright sky, gripping it where the metal was somewhat compressed to allow for a firmer grasp, she threaded the eye in one swift movement. Taking a narrow strip of paper out of the middle drawer, she silently reread the peculiar text written upon it, failing as always to understand any of it.

Mirtle off firr, asure to nil, combing, ne violeted, its foxglove, its rabbitfoot,  
an aliaunte frome all pioneys rose up to a bruske lief, as blake, nas; tremle, bor with  
greentails, yelows, knats, been sitting by, her rusting mites, rybes full of ernaling  
millc, a lilac in the falling seonne, and ocellated anir imperours aloft watched  
blooms, nes; rimlet after the stonne, emraud, of coole waterish water drue, ore  
hyacinthe, amates, clean with crack discussed, our star rubee, brack the rays of a  
sene orange or, nis; melter and map of a broke tale, lept fre herbish grase, dug by  
gulls and quales, tossed by horne and hoofe, aurora rory rising, rosy, ouver a petty  
floc of cootes, stille imbued with heliotrope, blu violet, bis, nys; myrtle wys nowthe.

Laying the piece of handwritten paper along the left edge of the printed page, so as to completely hide the circled word, she used the needle and thread to sew paper to paper, manuscript to book. Rather pleased with her handiwork, she closed the book; one could hardly tell that there was anything hidden among its pages. She rapidly packed up everything but the book and the bowl, which by now had only a single date remaining in it. Then she simply sat and waited, defiantly ignoring the furtive glances of the many passers-by.

The sun was already bent upon setting when she noticed in the growing crowd an older man proudly bearing the weight of a fully-grown, well-twirled black moustache. She hurried to lift herself up, her right hand against the wall, her back slightly arched backwards, her left hand pressing against her left thigh, her crown momentarily touching the wall's mortar. She picked up her things and urgently elbowed her way through the throng. When she reached him and introduced herself in English, he seemed surprised and suspicious, nervously shaking his head and turning away. She grabbed his forearm and continued talking, calmly but insistently, repeatedly pushing the

olive-covered book into his hand. At last he relented, stuffed the book into his coat pocket and walked away. After a few steps he glanced back at her, puzzled; she was still standing there, still watching him, her hands resting on her lower abdomen, her feverish eyes offering no reply.

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Once on a time there was a poor blacksmith who had a good-hearted wife but no children. They lived on the edge of a large village, which insisted on being called a town, in a humble stone cottage with a small adjoining smithy.

At first sight one would not have thought the house any different from a thousand other stone cottages, and indeed it was not. It had the same main room with the same small bedroom and the same small loft. Its only claim to fame, and not much of a claim at that, was a rather peculiar piece of furniture, a chest of drawers. Whoever had crafted it, evidently an expert carpenter, seemed to have possessed a very particular kind of artistic notion. It was as if someone had taken a perfectly sensible, that is rectangular, chest of drawers and sawn it all the way through from the top left corner to the bottom right. What resulted might have been quite unique and indeed fit marvellously well into the niche under the stairs leading up to the loft, but its usefulness was somewhat more questionable, especially when it came to the topmost drawer, which could at best accommodate a single cup or a dozen walnuts, and even that with some difficulty.

The blacksmith worked all day long in the smithy, which was little more than an overcramped cubbyhole dominated by a pair of bellows, an open hearth, and a one-horned anvil. He was a gentle and wise man, well-tempered and well-spoken, with a keen awareness of the dangers of erudition and a stern adherence to the time-tried tenets of illiteracy. His most poignant lesson had come to him at a young age, when still apprenticed to a master smith in a faraway land. One day a portly merchant had stopped by on his way to the king's court, leading an old broken-down horse heavily laden with books. Books of every colour and size, of every language and price, of every type and form; some printed on cheap rough paper, others gilded with the finest dyes; some quite proper for young princesses, others more suitable for older men; some to be read, others to be reread; some illustrated, some rare, some funny, some new; books about love, books about death, books about books; bibles and psalters, phrase-books and travel-books, astrological maps and agricultural calendars, gematric tables and anagrammatic lists, children's books and nannies' books, poems and novelettes, many and more. The merchant left the horse to be cared for, while he availed himself of the kind services of a nearby inn. Ordering the young apprentice to attend to the forge, the master smith set about examining the horse's shoes. As he was about to release the horse's last leg, he noticed some faint writing etched into the metal shoe. Curious, he leaned forward in an attempt to read it, his nose almost touching the hoof, inhaling the smell of deposits accumulated over many miles. The horse, who was not as keen as others to share its writing, chose that same moment to express its resentment by forcefully letting out with its hoof, squarely kicking the master smith in the mouth and leaving a permanent and indelible mark on the smith's teeth and on his diction. For the young apprentice and future blacksmith the writing was, so to speak, on the wall, taking the form of spattered blood that he had to clean off with some warm water and a coarse rag, leading to the inescapable conclusion that pencraft was best left alone and that literary composition could be detrimental to one's health.

The blacksmith's wife worked at home, baking breads, buns, bonnags and biscuits, which she sold to neighbours and at the town's marketplace. One day when she was kneading a new batch of dough and plaiting it into loaves, there was a faint knock on the door. Wiping her hands on her apron, she opened the door to find a pair of large black eyes staring at her from the dust-covered face of a child maybe six or seven years of age. Below the face were some torn rags that barely deserved to be called tatters and which came nowhere near to being able to hide the frail little body of a starving young girl. Without a word, the child extended a tiny cupped hand in a begging

motion. Visibly alarmed, the blacksmith's wife took hold of the feeble hand and gently led the girl to the large table by the hearth, beckoning her to sit on the long bench. The child merely stood there, ready to run away, until she caught sight of the woman loading a thin metal plate with thick slices of barley bread and a heavy jar of golden marmalade. Soon enough, the child was swallowing big chunks of scarcely-chewed bread, while the bakeress spread a generous layer of marmalade on the remaining slices and quietly asked the girl what had happened to her. For a while, the girl did not answer, concentrating instead on pushing gobs of unruly marmalade that were crawling down her chin and up her cheek back into her mouth with a filthy, dirt-encrusted palm. Then, between mouthfuls of bread and gulps of apple juice, she told a story of a wicked father who had driven her out into the street.

Three months earlier the girl had had a lovely dream, which she adamantly refused to tell anyone the slightest thing about. Her brother asked, her sister pestered, her mother implored, her father demanded, the dog barked, the cat hissed, even the fish in the stream pouted, but to all she had but one reply: she would not tell till it came true. Treats and threats had done little to change her mind, belts and bolts even less; she would not tell till it came true. Even when she had been thrown into the street, no longer a daughter of theirs, she wailed back defiantly at the locked door that she would not tell till it came true. And indeed she had not, not yet.

The blacksmith's wife said that she would have loved to have a nice little girl of her own, whom she would never ever abandon or abuse. The girl who could keep a secret replied that for a bicky and a penny she would teach the woman how to have a girl. Intrigued, the bakeress moved a plate of freshly baked biscuits in the girl's direction and supplemented it with a single penny coin, which immediately disappeared into some hidden recess on the child's person. Whispering conspiratorially while stuffing her mouth and pockets with more biscuits, the girl who could keep a secret said that all the woman had to do was eat lots and lots of delicious biscuits till she became all fat in the tummy, and then some more, and this way she would have a little girl of her own come out of her body within a year, or perhaps even three months. Amused, the blacksmith's wife thought she seemed to prefer the old-fashioned way, but nonetheless thanked the girl for her generous advice.

And indeed within a year, or perhaps even three months, the blacksmith's wife gave birth to a baby girl, who, upon reaching her first birthday, came to be called Catherine, or as often as not, Catreoney.

One autumn morning, when Catherine was brave enough to cross the wood to her grandmother's house all by herself, her mother dressed her in her favourite dress and her favourite coat, gave her a basket and sent her on her way to her grandmother's house. Her mother had filled the basket with a dozen shiny green apples and had added a brief letter. Although the letter was rather short, her mother had laboured over it for almost an hour, writing no more than one or two words every minute or so, perhaps as many as three if one was very simple, like a or the or and, for her grandmother was a very slow reader indeed and could not read any faster.

Once she was well within the wood, Catherine laid down the basket on the grassy ground and settled down beside it. Looking warily over her shoulder, she took out an apple and ate it, contentedly patting her belly. After the first, she ate a second, and a third, and another and another and another. Then she was on her way again and reached her grandmother's house well before any ant could discover the discarded apple cores.

While her grandmother unpacked the basket and read the letter in full, Catherine played with the cats in the back yard, so thrilled and elated that she hardly knew which leg to stand on. Even when faced with her grandmother's odd question about there being a dozen apples in the letter but only seven in the basket, her spirits remained undiminished. She giggled and explained that some of the apples had been so afraid of being cooked or baked or cut or eaten alive that they had escaped from the basket when she had not been looking; it was jolly lucky that they had not escaped from the letter too, perhaps because of the sealed envelope. By way of return post, her grandmother now wrote a letter of reply, jotting down words at a furious pace, scribbling letters ever so rapidly, filling

page after page in the blink of an eye, for it was well known that the bakeress was the fastest reader in town. Before sending Catherine back home, her grandmother secured the letter to the basket, which she packed with a cherry pie, four jam-filled doughnuts, a large dish of mushrooms cooked in a spicy onion and ginger sauce, and a couple of boiled artichokes.

When she was once again well within the wood, Catherine stopped a few feet away from where she had stopped before, so as not to disturb the busy ants. However, now the wiser after having witnessed the true power of words, she first took her grandmother's letter and put it behind the trunk of a giant redwood tree, to make quite sure that it would not see what she was eating and could not tell on her to her mother. Then eat she did. She ate the caps off all the mushrooms, leaving the stems untouched; she surgically removed the hearts of both artichokes, then sewed their leaves back onto their stems, so that they appeared otherwise quite intact; she carefully lifted the upper crust of the pie and scooped out all the dark red filling straight into her mouth before returning the crust to its proper place; and to cap it all, she stuck her forefinger into each of the doughnuts, draining out the purple jam and licking it happily away. Sated, she patted her belly, picked up the letter and the basket, and strolled back home, where she would deliver to her mother an impressive speech on the unique virtues of such agricultural and culinary specialities as heartless artichokes, headless mushrooms, hollow doughnuts and empty pies.

Later that evening, after a dinner that fully explored the said virtues of those special dishes, the blacksmith's wife brought the four doughnuts to the table, one for father, one for mother, one for Catherine, and one for whoever had eaten the artichokes' hearts. Catherine silently nibbled on her doughnut and drummed her fingers on the table. Finally she took the fourth doughnut and with hardly any appetite left nibbled on it too, muttering that she so wanted a baby brother and that she had heard that if one ate lots and lots of food till one became all fat in the tummy, and then some more, one would have a little boy of one's own come out of one's body within a year, or perhaps even three months. Trying not to laugh, the blacksmith and his wife said that they would have to see what could be done about it, possibly even that very same night.

And indeed within a year, or perhaps even three months, the blacksmith's wife gave birth to a baby boy, who, when he reached his first birthday, came to be called Alfred, or as often as not, Alfie.

One winter evening, when Alfred was old enough to enjoy a bedtime story and Catherine was old enough to understand it, their mother was old enough to tell one. The two children were lying in bed in the loft above their parents' bedroom, shoulder to shoulder, wrapped in a heavy brown blanket from toe to chin, waiting eagerly for their mother to begin their bedtime story, *Sleeping Beauty*.

There were or there were not a king and a queen who had one daughter and one son. The daughter's name was Catreney and the son, who was younger, was called Alfie. After a long time the queen gave birth to another little daughter, another princess. It was the custom in that land to hold a large celebration shortly after the birth of a child, but since the king and queen were kind rulers and did not tax their citizens heavily, they did not have much money to spend on a frivolous party. They therefore decided to invite only the aunts of the new princess, of which there was no shortage, the king having nine sisters and the queen six. However, because they had only fourteen sets of dishes for their guests, possibly quite a lot for a commoner but apparently not enough for a sovereign, they invited only fourteen aunts, altogether not a wise decision given the nature of aunts.

On the day of the occasion everything was getting along quite famously, considering, until the fifteenth aunt arrived, most upset at not having been invited. An uneasy silence fell over the dining hall as one and all watched her standing there at the doorway. Furious, she uttered a prophecy, exclaiming at the top of her shrill voice that when the princess reached her fourteenth birthday she would prick her finger on a spindle and die.

Slightly taken aback by the horrified looks of the royal family, especially the princess's brother and sister, she immediately revised her prophecy to let it be known that when the princess

reached her fourteenth birthday she would prick her finger on a spindle and sleep for one hundred years, or perhaps eighty years, or even sixty years, or well maybe forty. Only that then a young maidservant came rushing out of the kitchen and bumped into the angry aunt, spilling some sticky sauce on her otherwise quite appealing dress. Doubly furious, the aunt stormed out, never to be seen again.

And so it was predicted that when the princess reached her fourteenth birthday she would prick her finger on a spindle and sleep for forty years and forty nights; and with her, the entire palace. The princess would fall asleep, the chamberlain would fall asleep, the steward would fall asleep, the cook would fall asleep, the undercook would fall asleep, the maid would fall asleep, the sentry would fall asleep, the horse would fall asleep, the dog would fall asleep, the footman would fall asleep, the page would fall asleep, the governess would fall asleep, the cat would fall asleep, the fire would fall asleep, the wind would fall asleep, the king would fall asleep, the queen would fall asleep, and finally, when the entire palace was all silent, with a whisper, Catreney and Alfie would fall asleep too.

Crouching to avoid hitting her head against the wooden rafters, their mother tiptoed in the dark towards the stairs leading down to the main room, only to be cut short by a soft but insistent and.

And the king, who was obviously not too familiar with prophecies, overreacted a bit. He decreed that spinning was strictly prohibited throughout the realm and ordered all spindles and distaffs to be burned forthwith. And so for more than a dozen years, a baker's dozen years, the kingdom had to do wholly without spinners. Yet despite it all, on her fourteenth birthday the princess went astray about the castle and ended up at the door of the topmost room of the topmost tower, where a rusty key was waiting in the lock. Opening the door, she found there two old women and one old man, all three involved in some quaint activity, which the princess was only too eager to join. Needless to say, they were spinning and, needless to say, the princess presently pricked her finger on a spindle. And as soon as she did, her knees gave way and she passed off into deep sleep.

And so, as predicted, the princess fell asleep and with her the chamberlain fell asleep, the cook fell asleep, the undercook fell asleep, the spinner fell asleep, the footman fell asleep, the soldier fell asleep, the sentry fell asleep, the horse fell asleep, the dog fell asleep, the cat fell asleep, the mouse fell asleep, the king fell asleep, the queen fell asleep, the fire fell asleep, the water fell asleep, the wind fell asleep, the page fell asleep, the story fell asleep, and at long last Catreney and Alfie fell asleep too.

Making her way again from her children's bed to her own, this time she almost reached the main room, dimly lit by the glowing embers of a waning fire, before being stopped by an older, drowsier and more timid and.

And all around the palace a thick forest of thorns grew overnight, blocking all entry and rising to hide even the tallest tower from outside eyes. And within these walls of thorn, the entire palace continued to sleep. And through the open window of the topmost room of the topmost tower, a single thorn fell in and came to lie on the sleeping princess's chest. At first small and light, with time the thorn grew bigger and heavier, pressing on the princess's chest and making her breathing ever more difficult, then tunnelling its way into her bosom and forming there a dense ball of spikes and hooks. From one year's end to another, the wound in the princess's chest healed, but within her bosom, under her skin, the thorn continued to thrive. Many years passed by, many generations, many more worn blankets than shoes, till once upon a day a.

She sat there in the semi-darkness, a bit tired, a bit sad, a bit guilty, listening to the children's heavy breaths. After a few minutes of silence, she descended the staircase, felt her way along the base of the stairs and the chest of drawers, opened the bedroom door, and crept into her bed. She lay there, clasping the body of her snoring and mumbling husband to her own, and rapidly fell asleep too.

And the ball of thorns in the princess's bosom grew larger and larger. It ate its way inside her

ribcage and crossed down through her midriff. It drew its sustenance from her body, draining her heart, her liver, her spleen. As it grew, so did her abdomen, which became more and more distended, until the skin could hold no longer and her belly ruptured open in a spurt of blood, revealing a monstrous confusion of nettles and brambles filling her torso.

And indeed within a year, or perhaps even three months, the blacksmith's wife gave birth to a lovely little baby girl.

Barely a week after the birth, the bakeress was back at her bread and bun baking business. On market day, she put the baby in a large well-padded basket, added in some of her baked goods, borrowed a pair of heavy iron pokers from the smithy, and set out to town. At her stall, she spread out her wares and placed the basket with the sleeping baby where she could watch it at all times. She laid the two iron pokers crosswise over the basket for protection, sprinkled some salt on the baby's chest for added measure, and straightened the blanket up to the baby's chubby little chin, all the while quite aware that the first customer was already checking out her buns. The day was busy and the business brisk, but despite the commotion the little angel continued to sleep undisturbed, sucking on her tiny fist.

Soon she was down to two caraway cross-buns and a raisin cake, when the carpenter's wife, a regular, arrived. She bought the cake and, making sure that nobody was watching, winked at the bakeress and pointed at both their lower abdomens. Without drawing too much attention to herself, the bakeress reached rather matter-of-factly into her apron-pocket and took out a small grey pouch tied with a red ribbon, quickly slipping it into the other woman's palm and accepting a three-pence piece in return. After a short whispered conversation, the carpenter's wife turned away and the bakeress threw a cursory glance at the baby. To her horror, the pokers were lying on the ground. She rushed to the basket and gave a choked cry. The baby in the basket was not hers. While she had been distracted, somebody had replaced her baby with another, with a little devil, with one of them, with a changeling. Although it bore a strong resemblance to her own little girl, she knew, as any mother would instinctively know, that it was not hers, that thing that lay on the blanket, smiling and grinning at her. She clutched her head, tearing at her hair, yelling at the top of her voice, bringing the market to a momentary standstill. The baby, terrified, joined her in wailing. She grabbed the basket and rushed home with it.

The blacksmith was at his anvil when she charged into the smithy. Amid tears and sobs she related the bare facts, thrusting the basket with the bawling baby at his face. Alarmed, he put down his hammer and peeked in. Looking back and forth from weeping mother to crying daughter, he could tell that this time he was out of his depth. For the love of his life, the baby looked exactly like his own daughter, the very same he had kissed on the forehead only a few hours before, perfectly identical down to her cute little fingers and her off-white cotton undershirt. Quietly, he tried to calm his wife, assuring her that this was indeed their daughter and not a changeling, gently hinting that she might have just imagined it all, what with all the trouble and the stress and the emotion that they had been having of late. With a spasm of disillusion and betrayal twisting her face, she crumpled at his feet, sobbing even harder. He crouched down and hugged her shoulders, caressing her tousled hair and her damp cheek. However, before he could say anything to ease her mind, she stood up, straightened her apron and her hat, picked up the basket and walked out, leaving the blacksmith standing at a loss.

She went straight to the town surgeon, an educated and sensible old man of a scientific and inquiring mind who was a proper physician and therefore knew a whole lot. By the time she had reached his house, she was calmer and more determined; the little tyke, however, just kept on whining and squalling, squalling and whining. Inside, she quickly described how her daughter had been spirited away, surely by them whose name she dared not voice, and a yelping monster left in her place, clearly in order for it to profit from a loving mother's rich human milk. To prove her case beyond any doubt, she had only to call attention to the creature's swollen head, to its large eyes, to its flat nose, to its odd posture, to its incessant screaming, all telltale signs of a genuine changeling.

While she talked and talked, the surgeon watched her calmly over his tented fingers and nodded his head from time to time. When she was finally done, he invited her to sit down and lifted the baby girl into his arms, rocking her gently until she stopped crying. He smiled at the mother and said that the child indeed seemed to be a changeling, a child of the little people left in place of her kidnapped own. He sensibly explained that the simplest way to get rid of a changeling was to whip it with a switch, to spank it until it was all black and blue, to beat it mercilessly until it could bear it no more and fled away to its own people, who would then be compelled to return the true child to its rightful parents. She should be ready for a short ordeal but if she persevered it would all end up just fine.

On the way home, she tried to imagine herself beating the little mite until it ran away and her own lovely daughter came back, but the gentle autumn afternoon, with its golden leaves paving the path, its bees buzzing among the flowers, its birds pecking at the thatched roof, kept intruding upon her thoughts. Nevertheless, back at the house she locked the front door, put the little infant on her lap, innocent face down, bare bottom up, and went on to beat it with a tender twig that she had picked up along the way, to flog it until her arm grew tired and her whole body was sore and aching. The tiny infant screamed and howled and screeched and wailed and twisted and twitched, but run away it did not.

When it was all done and over, she unlatched the banged-upon door to let her wild-eyed husband in and, without a word, returned to her chair, exposed her left breast and set about to nurse the child. After a few more shrieks, the baby calmed down and began to feed on her milk. Suddenly she yelled in pain; the little monster had bitten her and tiny beads of blood appeared on her nipple. It was now sucking at her tit much more vigorously than it had ever done before, as if it had an unquenchable thirst or an insatiable hunger to satisfy, as if it were intent upon ravenously wolfing down the entire breast rather than just drawing up the milk. Nonetheless, she continued to suckle it, tears of pain and misery rolling down her cheeks.

The following morning, with both her nipples bruised and tender, she took the infant to see the parson. Stopping her from entering the church with the accursed child in her arms, he explained that changelings were children of the devil and prescribed the daily lighting of a candle to god as the proper means for securing one's true child from the clutches of evil. Out of true compassion he even let her have several such candles at a greatly reduced price.

Over the next few days, she settled into a daily routine. Every morning, with the children gone to school and the blacksmith steadily banging at his anvil, she would beat the infant, sometimes with her bare hands, sometimes with a belt or a twig or a rope, sometimes on its bottom, sometimes on its body or its arms or its legs, until she could no longer withstand its shrieks and its howls, which seemed to grow more inhuman by the day. She would then nurse it back to calmness, tuck it safely into its rocking cradle, and apply some salve to her wounded nipples, before setting about on her daily work. Every evening, she would light a pair of candles, which she soon began making on her own, selling the surplus on market day. She made room for the candles on the dark cottage floor in front of the fireplace, one vervain-scented candle on the right for the help of god and one myrtle-scented candle on the left for the help of the devil, for she reasoned that under the circumstances it would be best to be on good terms with both. This practice of covert beating and overt lighting continued for many weeks, until one day Alfred returned from school all too early.

He rushed in elated while the screeching changeling was still on his mother's lap, just in time to catch a glimpse of her raised arm ready to fall again. He stood in the doorway with joyful eyes and a broad smile, proudly declaring that he had learned a new tale at school and had memorised it by heart. As he clambered up to stand on the bench and prepared to recite the tale, she hurriedly applied the infant's crying mouth to her breast, listening attentively to the stammering boy and vigorously clapping her hands in pleasure when the short recital was all over.

There was a fox who was very hungry. Then he saw a bunch of grapes hanging very high, like a rain of relish. The grapes were very sour. The fox jumped in the air as high as he could again

and again, but the grapes were very high. So he gave up and walked away thinking how lucky he was not to have eaten the grapes, because they were very sour.

After that, the beating and the candle-lighting continued as before, but the changeling did not run away and the true daughter was not returned. When the baby girl reached her first birthday she was named Tanya, and on that day the blacksmith's wife took her to see the parson again. He was plainly disturbed by the sight of the year-old changeling, a sickly deformed puny creature, all skin and bones, glowering eyes and voracious appetite, and he hastened to offer a new solution. She was to go to the graveyard, leave the child there all by itself, hide nearby, and wait patiently until the devil itself grew so sick of hearing the changeling's incessant snivelling that it came to fetch it back and left her own true child in its place.

On the way out, she tried to imagine herself abandoning the little tot in a gloomy graveyard so as to get her own lovely daughter back, but had a hard time concentrating, what with the noise of the birds and the bees and the leaves that was ganging up on her from all sides. Nevertheless, at the graveyard she did exactly as told, kneeling behind a tree, watching Tanya crawling awkwardly among the gravestones as she searched for her mother, and hearing her crying her lungs out until well after sunset. At last, she came out, dried both their faces, picked Tanya up and returned home. That night, when everybody was fast asleep, Tanya crawled down the stairs and across the main room to where the two guttering candles stood. With palpable unsteadiness she stood up on shaky legs spread wide apart and slightly bent at the knees. A few seconds later, an arc of urine issued forth from her, snuffing out the right-hand candle.

After that, the beating and the candle-lighting continued as before, but the changeling did not run away and the true daughter was not returned. Every morning, while the dough was rising, the bakeress would flog Tanya with a thin rod for seven minutes or thereabouts, then apply some salve to the lashing marks and give her her breakfast, which by the time Tanya was three was the largest in the family. Every evening, she would light the two candles, Tanya totteringly holding on to her and watching the flames dance, as if to a tune only she could hear. This went on for many months, until one fateful afternoon, when Catherine, Alfred and Tanya were out playing behind the house.

Some distance from the back of the house, past the peat stack and the midden heap, in the shade of an elder tree, there stood a water well. It was a rather massive stone structure, a large circular curb surmounted by two columns and a cross-beam. A rope-and-pulley system held one wooden bucket dangling up in the air while the other lay full of water deep down within the pit.

Near this well, Catherine and Alfred were flinging a ball of rags high up in the air, while Tanya was sitting on the ground, absently staring at nothing in particular. At the age of four, Tanya still did not speak a word and seemed to have little volition of her own beyond a keen appetite and a fondness for gazing at flaring flames. Wherever she was placed, there she sat without a motion on her, deaf and dumb to the living world.

Yet things were about to change when the ball, a bit too zealously thrown, hit Tanya on the head, producing no visible reaction from her before bouncing off straight into the mouth of the well. With little delay or deliberation, Alfred climbed into the top bucket and with Catherine's help was soon at the bottom of the well, retrieving the floating ball. But when Catherine pulled on the rope to raise her brother out, it would not move. She strained and she hauled, the rough rope cutting into her small palms, but nothing budged. It almost seemed as if somebody was pulling back, trying to draw her too into the well. Frantically, she rushed about collecting rocks and stones into the top bucket, but even when full and clearly heavy enough, it would not raise the other bucket from below. Only when Catherine herself, out of desperation, climbed into the bucket did the rope move, hurtling the brother up to the surface and the sister down into the pit.

Down in the well, Catherine wisely removed all the rocks from the bucket and waited for her brother to heave her up. Now it was Alfred's turn to pull and tug with all his might, with much the same success as his sister and much the same panic. Finally, he too was left with no option but to

climb again into the top bucket, whereupon the rope, having had enough jollity for one day, decided it was time for a break. While Alfred fell down, half the rope trailing after him, Catherine remained at the bottom, promptly joined by the other half. Drenched, bleeding and terrified, the sister and brother huddled together at the bottom of the well, watching the darkening circle of overcast sky high above their heads.

What seemed like ages later, but was really less than it took Tanya to shuffle all the way to the smithy and back again, they heard the voice of their father and saw his head silhouetted against the clouds. They soon realised, however, that he was not addressing them; he was speaking to the well, asking for its help. At first nothing happened, but as their father's gentle tone rolled down along the round walls of the well, something moved at the bottom. As unlikely as it would seem, two small birds, a fieldfare and a bluethroat, slowly emerged from the black rocks by the children's heads, shaking off the effects of centuries of petrification. They took hold of the two frayed ends of the rope and flew up in circles, hoisting the two buckets and the two children up and out of the well. Soaked but sound, Catherine and Alfred hugged their father's waist; he in turn smiled at Tanya. For a brief moment a shy smile crossed her face too, replaced almost at once by her regular expressionless mask.

After that, the beating and the candle-lighting continued as before, until some months later, when Tanya's mother, worried about Tanya's inability to speak and her uncommon leanness, paid another visit to the town surgeon. With the child waiting outside, he snapped a few sharp words at the mother for not having followed his instructions in earnest and then read to her from his medical books. The various scientific methods for ridding oneself of a changeling were as diverse as setting fire to its hair, burning its nose with red-hot tongs, roasting it alive on an iron griddle, or throwing it body and limb into a raging furnace, each alternative guaranteed to bring one's true child back, even if some sounded a trifle drastic to an untrained eye.

On the way home, Tanya listened attentively as her mother shared with her all that the doctor had said and they both tried to imagine inflicting and undergoing the measures that he had just prescribed. Back at the cottage, Tanya added some peat to the fire and, with much difficulty and awkwardness, kicked the heavy tongs and the sooty griddle into the fireplace. Then she turned to her mother, who was sprawled on the floor, sobbing, and laid her little hands on her shaking head, gently moving them back and forth. When this led to even more pronounced sobbing, she walked to the chest of drawers, inched out the bottom drawer and took out a thin rod. She brought it to her mother, who looked at it through tear-veiled eyes and pushed it away. Undeterred, Tanya held the rod with both hands and softly, almost caressingly, tapped it time and again on her mother's thigh. Then she too lay down on the hard clay floor, pressing her body against her mother's until they both fell asleep.

After that, the beating and the candle-lighting continued as before, until some years later, when Catherine was already long apprenticed to a local seamstress. Most afternoons and evenings Catherine would sit by the hearth and practise her needlework on old socks and torn kerchiefs, usually in the company of a cat or two and of Tanya, who would be sitting at her feet staring at the fire. On one such afternoon, Catherine turned to her sister and asked her if she would like to help her. Tanya nodded. While Tanya's thin elongated fingers held on to a length of floral cloth to keep it fully stretched, Catherine skilfully worked a pair of scissors to divide it lengthwise into two identical strips. Smiling, Catherine then asked her sister if she would like to have a sewing contest with her. Tanya nodded. They would each sew a bride's bonnet and the first to finish would be the winner. Given a sisterly choice between two threaded needles, one with a thread so short that it could not even serve as a spider's belt, the other admittedly much longer, Tanya unthinkingly picked the latter, ending up with a thread that could easily encircle the royal palace twice over and still leave enough for a makeshift rope to ring the bells of the highest belfry in the land.

They set to their sewing. Catherine's fingers raced about with unmistakable mastery, stretching, folding, threading, rethreading, cutting, stitching, cross-stitching, measuring, adjusting,

examining, pausing, thinking, unstitching, restitching and back-stitching. Meanwhile, Tanya was having some trouble with her longish thread, as every stitch led to a ravel, every ravel to a knot, every knot to a tangle, every tangle to a mess. She soon found herself having to climb out of the window, run all the way round the house and the smithy, and return through the front door with every single stitch just to keep the thread from further entanglement. Yet she persevered, stopping only when Catherine held out a proud hand capped with a perfectly formed bonnet and declared herself the winner, by which time Tanya had managed to tie both her feet together, to cocoon her entire left arm to her body, and to clutch in her right hand an almost passable bonnet fit for a rather diminutive rabbit with each of its ears longer than the other. Then Tanya did something that no one expected. She laughed. For the first time a joyful sound came out of her otherwise silent throat. She rolled on the floor and laughed and laughed and laughed.

And the laughter spread across the house. It entered a sister's ear and a brother's eye, a father's liver and a mother's heart. It sweetened every piece of pastry and tempered every scrap of metal. It flew to the loft to fluff up the cushions on the children's bed; it tippy-toed into the parents' bedroom and bounced up and down on the mattress; it leaped into the fireplace and danced a wild waltz with the flames; it crawled under the triangular chest of drawers to see what secrets lay behind; it hurled itself out of the window to explore the world without; it climbed up a tree and painted its leaves green; it slid down a ray of sunshine and plunged into the well; it dug into the midden heap and helped a cabbage stalk rot; it greeted a busy rat and kissed a sleeping snail; it fed a brood of chicks and saved a worm's life; it ate eight dates and then four more; it jumped on a bee's back and thence to the roof; it lazed on the thatch and hopped down the chimney, at last returning to its proper place in Tanya's mouth and tucking itself under her lolling tongue.