

A Godmother's Gift

by January Mortimer

Announcement of a Birth

I set out the offerings and the homages and wrote the ten secret names of the Dark-That-Comes-After in blood. At midnight, I sliced the proud cox-combed head from a black cockerel and I read the entrails of a dove.

All the portents were the same.

The babe would be born wrong.

But Maddy, sweet, guileless Maddy, would not listen.

Invitation

Autumn visited my basement apartment with a smell of dried tomatoes and mushrooms and magic. Mellow light slipped in through the high-up window and coiled about like Pipistrelle, stealthy-footed and purring.

I loved autumn: loved the season's slow winding down before the sun kissed the earth goodnight.

But that year I was afraid.

Clients visited, too -- to beg charms, healings or curses -- standing awkward-stiff and wary and leaving in a rush of relief. Fleeing the witch's den.

And Maddy came. Maddy who wanted nothing but to sit at my table, chatting and laughing at my worrying.

"Your more of a fuss than Paul," she said, and, "You brood like a hen, Ma Jenkins!" And then, on a late October afternoon, "Ma Jenkins, I know it's not regular, but there's no one else I'd rather -- I mean -- we wondered if you'd be our baby's godmama." She spoke the last words in a rush, racing to get them out and finding them said, smiled. The light of expectant motherhood shone in her eyes.

"Oh, sweetie. . . ." *The babe's not right, sweetie. Not right and getting worse. You're twenty-four: there's time for others. Just let this one go.* I couldn't say it, not to all that glowing joy.

She squeezed my hand. Her china doll's hand smooth and perfect against mine: wrinkled and calloused like rough-hewn wood. "Ma, don't worry! Even if something does go wrong, we've doctors, and the Lord wouldn't give us anything we couldn't handle!"



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Pipistrelle's purr hummed in my bones as he begged for a petting. Green eyes watched my face, innocent of all evil. Just like Maddy's happy, human-brown ones.

She said, "And if something was wrong, you'd love the baby anyway, wouldn't you?"

"Of course I would, Princess," I said. It was a promise.

I kissed her goodbye, waved her up the stairs to the sunny afternoon.

Poor sweetie, I thought. I'll be strong for you.

And, with stricken shame, I prayed to the Powers and the Dark for a babe to be born dead.

Witch In Waiting

Days and months slid by. Sleet slithered from the wintery skies and collected in ugly, dirty heaps: corrupted beauty.

Uglier still were the words I had been too much of a coward to say.

In Maddy's apartment, baby shower gifts lay like bits of broken rainbow: milk bottles and elephant-print blankets and mobiles in bright primary colours. Maddy curled on a sofa, chattering and laughing, telling me of names and paint and parenting manuals. Her belly rose rounded and ripe under her cotton blouse; she rested a hand upon its curve, as if to cup the child within.

The Darkness peered from the shadows. *Wrong, it warned. Death. Misery. Despair.*

So much pain. All from one unborn infant.

"I'd love the babe anyway," I said. *"No matter what."*

The Darkness muttered and was silent.

The tragic face of a painted Christ gazed from a wall. Gentle brush strokes made his hair look soft, as if you would reach into the picture and run fingers through the tangled locks. Maddy and Paul had Faith, kept religion not as a cripple's crutch but as a blind man's cane: a guide to keep them safe in dark places.

Maddy trusted in something good and great and beautiful and strong, and I, unbelieving -- with only the stealthy Darkness-On-The-Edge-Of-Everything -- almost envied her.

You should have taken care of her, I told the Christ.

Maddy broke off her chatter, lips a surprised 'O'.

"Are you all right, Princess?"

She beamed. "I think it's time!"

I locked their apartment as Paul whisked her away. Then, I returned to the basement -- to

my cat and the phone -- and waited.

A Summoning Call

“Ma. . .It’s Paul. . . . Can you come? I think. . .I think Maddy’s going to need someone.”

Cursed Child

White coat, white mask, white rubbery gloves, white floors, ceilings, doors: the hospital bathed itself in sterile white, as if banish death with the brilliance. Paul stumbled through the corridors and wards as if snow-blinded; above the mask, his eyes blinked red and wet.

I followed.

Tiny babies lay in plastic domes like dolls, brand new and still tied to their packing with tubes and wires, waiting to be unwrapped. Monitors chirped electronic noises and hummed electronic lullabies.

And there it was. Maddy’s offspring.

Wrong.

Wrong like a nightmare. Wrong like a cursed thing out of a tale.

The babe had two heads. Two heads and only one with a body. The second grew out of her sister’s scalp, like an image reflected in a broken mirror -- perfect brow, cheekbones, puckered mouth, chin -- ending in a confusion of unshaped flesh. One twin had grown, the other. . . hadn’t.

I had expected something. But not this. Worst fears are never terrible enough.

“Ah me,” I said. “That’s...that’s difficult.”

In the incubator, it -- she -- *they* -- blinked, opened their mouths to wail. . . .

A single reedy cry drifted up. The unformed child had no lungs to cry with.

Maddy’s husband gazed at his babies, his face frozen, horror and those red, unshed tears in his eyes. “They call it conjoined twins craniopagus parasiticus. It’s rare. Only a few born since--” Paul covered his face, inhaling a sharp, wounded breath. “Maddy doesn’t know yet.”

Then he fled, ashamed of his pain.

I watched the rise and fall of a single chest.

“Your godmamma’s here now,” I said.

In stories, the godmother bestows gifts -- beauty, wealth, good fortune -- but she’s always a fairy. An ethereal spirit, while I was an old, worn-out witch.

In those same stories, the witch has her role, too. She lays curses where others lay gifts.

The unformed twin grimaced and slept, leaving her more fortunate twin blinking birth-blue eyes. Then the second sister, too, slept.

Verdict of the King and Queen

It was lonely in the Dark beneath the earth. Four months as a godmother, and my basement apartment filled with “what-if’s” and “maybe’s”.

Was it my fault? Something I did? Punishment for a transgression forgotten?

No, I told myself. Just bad luck. Bad things hurting good people. You’re old enough to know that. The world is not black or white, good or evil, and there is no reward for either.

But what if--

Grey rain sidled out of a greyer sky: autumn had come and gone again, and all the world was painted in the hazy shades of winter.

The hospital released Maddy as a fragile waif with a bassinet and eyes too big for her face. The laughter was dead on her lips, the innocence and joy had dried up and withered, as if left too long in a blazing heat or a cold so deep it froze the soul.

“Ma Jenkins,” she said. “Thank you for the cake. Paul and I really enjoyed it.”

We stood in the parking lot, one going, the other arriving. Maddy’s arms were locked over her breast, hugging her coat. Grocery bags hunched at her feet, the plastic snapping in the wind.

“You having a party, sweetie?” The bags were filled to bursting.

Maddy said, “No! No, I mean... my parents are coming.”

“That’s fine, honey. You have a good time.” I understood: I was not invited.

There was talk of a Christening. Witches do their worst at Christenings, isn’t that what the stories tell us?

The sad urban trees stood naked and ashamed, the rain lingering on their branches like captured tears. I watched Maddy haul her bags to the apartment lobby, moving slow and wearily, as if she were older than I.

“What-if”, the traitorous voice in my head murmured. Maybe things would be different.

When I returned to my basement, Pipistrelle jumped into my arms and cuddled under my chin, a warm bundle of trust and love; he didn’t care about the ‘maybe’s’.

Maddy’s parents arrived; I eavesdropped, keyhole-peered, looked out of shadows with the eyes of the Dark.

The babes rested in the bassinet. The fortunate twin had discovered hands can grasp and

rattles can shake and she crooned wet baby delight; her sister smiled too, making soundless goldfish-faces. An oxygen cylinder and a mask made for a baby's face waited nearby, along with Post-it notes of doctors' home-phone numbers and instructions in the care of a seriously unwell child.

The mounds of baby-shower gifts were long gone.

Maddy's parents sat poker-backed, pursing their lips as if the air tasted of lemons.

Paul tried. "These are your granddaughters."

Grandmother looked away.

"When will it die?" Grandfather wore the collar of a minister and the righteousness of a Good Man. In the Dark, I could hear the words he wasn't saying, "*The Lord is punishing you, Madeline. Whatever you've done, God knows.*"

A hiccup sound escaped Maddy's lips. She stood and left the room, escaping to the kitchen to cry.

A boy -- boys -- in the 1790s lived together as one for four years. Their skulls still sit in a London museum, gathering dust and horrified stares: the two-headed Boy of Bengal, dead of a viper bite so many years ago.

Grandfather knew this. He was not ignorant. He was also not sorry.

Grandmother looked at him -- Queen to his King -- the follower despite her rogue-cheeked majesty and pride.

There was no love lost between them.

She followed their daughter.

Maddy leaned over the sink; steam rose from the dishwater and stroked her face with damp, warm fingers. Grandmother picked up a drying cloth and took a plate from Maddy's fingers. She said, "I assume you are considering medical procedures?"

Maddy nodded. She inhaled the soap-scented steam, swallowing her tearless, hiccupping sobs.

Cut away the "parasitic" twin. The plans were already in order, awaiting Maddy and Paul's signatures.

I looked out of the Dark and saw, for once, that Godmother and Grandmother agreed. Medical Procedures: the murder of our less-fortunate little girl. And we loved her, despite it all, despite the curse neither she nor I could lift.

Grandmother let out a breath; the steam fluttered then continued rising. "You wash," she said. "I'll dry."

Rose thorns

Summer rain slid down Maddy's window, making the world outside blurred and soft. Cut flowers wilted in a vase, their petals falling, drenching the window sill in red: dead roses, nothing more than sticks covered in thorns.

I had nothing to say.

The rain pelted, the wind cried, and Maddy watched, sitting with her knees tucked up. Her gold chain hung without its crucifix.

"The surgery's next month," Maddy said. "Dr. Sanchess says. . . says there's. . . every chance of success." She spoke as if the wind was stealing the words from her lips. Pipistrelle jumped onto the sofa and rubbed his cheek on her folded hands.

"We're going to call her Emily, if she. . . if she doesn't die."

I held a plastic bag of home-baked goodies; I set them aside. Sugared things can only solve so much. "That's a nice name, princess."

Emily's sister wouldn't get a name.

Maddy smiled a worn smile; it faded too quickly. "I wish there was something I could do. But there isn't. There's nothing at all."

Emily squalled; Maddy closed her eyes and pulled Pipistrelle close.

"Go lie down, sweetie. You let Ma Jenkins do some godmothering."

Maddy wandered away like a sleepwalker, cuddling my cat. She hadn't slept a full night in weeks, Paul had told me. Too much guilt and fear and crying babe.

Emily's sobs trailed into snuffles. She sucked on a balled fist, face screwed up in continued misery. She couldn't lift her head, I noticed, her sister's weight held her down, and the breaths she sucked were ragged. Breathing for two, and struggling.

I rocked the twins and listened to the unhappy weather.

A Pound of Flesh and Bone

I went where the Darkness led me.

"You know why I'm here." I said the words on doorsteps, in floral-scented funeral homes, in neat sitting rooms cradling hot coffee. Different places, same words, same expression on my listeners' faces. "It's time to pay the piper."

Magic, true magic, that linger in wild places, is neither good nor evil. Like the Darkness, it simply is, waiting silent until you close your eyes and see it. A love charm, an evicting of

illness, a spell to ease pain, to harm, to balm; whatever the clients demanded, it was all the same to the Dark. And all of it had a price. Eventually.

I collected the payment. "Why now?" a grieving father asked. He sat with his hands in his lap, a shell of a man, a living ghost. "Damn you! Why?"

But the Dark has no answers. It takes as it gives, one as frequently as the other. Death had come in the night, though it was not my doing.

I merely took my pound of flesh and bone.

The Witch Comes

At the appointed hour, I was there. Uninvited. I watched as Maddy kissed the babes one last time and then locked herself in the ladies' room, leaving Paul helplessly alone; watched as the gurney -- so large for a burden so small -- trundled away.

Though the operating theatre was white-white-white, the taste of old Death hovered like a spectre.

A New Age witch in a nurse's white regalia, her silver and crystal pentagram mass-produced in an Eastern European factory, waited at the surgeon's elbow, murmuring old charms she could not hope to understand. Her world was purified into a warped reflection of the real one: Life without the Death, Life purged into false existence.

How ironic it was that it would be I, and not her, defying the right of Death.

Neither nurse nor surgeons saw me.

Knives danced, blood leaked, knives danced again. With slow precision they cut my goddaughters apart.

I wet my fingers in the unformed babe's blood. Dabbed it my lips and breast and wrists where blue-veins pulsed under the skin, giving her my breath, my heartbeat, a little more time. And I spoke to the Darkness-on-the-Edge-of-Everything. The-Darkness-That-Comes-After.

It stirred. *This is what you want?* it asked. *This is all?*

"No," I told it.

The Darkness quoted the cost and it was a terrible one. *This is what you want?* it repeated.

I too, must pay a pound of flesh. I looked at the blood and the glitter of the dancing knives and refused to look away. "Yes"

Flesh parted, severed under unrelenting scalpels and the single child was divided into one wounded child and a bundle of dying meat and bone: my goddaughters.

I gathered the unformed child to my breast; the other -- Emily -- did not require my care.



There I stood, in a coat of Darkness and jewellery of bone, blood upon my lip and a bodiless child in my arms, and only one saw me: the nurse with her diluted power and ideals of perfection. Around us, doctors whirled, blind to the little old woman and her grim baggage.

“Who are you?” she said, her eyes wide windows.

“The Godmother.” I walked on.

The unformed babe opened her mouth and soundlessly wailed.

The Price of Pain

The woodland wore a perfume of smoke and leaf litter and healthy, wet decay. Beneath my feet, Life and Death moved in their circuits, overlapping in the realm of roots and worms. I could feel them: Life, Death and Worms.

“Not far now, darling.”

The unformed babe was silent.

I had left the sack in the back-seat of a burnt-our Volkswagen. Abandoned years ago, it sat rusting into the forest floor, dreaming of open roads and speed. The paint-less hood became my surgeon’s table.

Pipistrelle wound round my legs, stalking the hem of my skirt as it swirled just out of reach.

I opened the sack, and removed its grim content.

Children. Laura Mulligan, Andrew Jones, Fran Heinz: a car crash, a flight of stairs and a fall, and a faulty heart. They would not need their legs and arms, nor the ripe, red organs nestled inside. They were gone into the Darkness, and that which they left behind could be put to use.

For my goddaughter.

I cut and sewed ‘til my fingers bled. As the cool stars twinkled, I stroked the downy remnants of my goddaughter’s hair and fitted the mangled flesh that, in a kinder world, would have been her body onto the sewn construct.

The Darkness waited like loan shark for payment.

Pipistrelle leapt onto the roof of the car, sniffing at the unfinished construction laid out there. He meowed a plaintive query, innocent and loving.

I scratched his chin.

“Good kitty,” I said.

And I brought the knife down.

A Godmother's Gift

"Your Godmother's supposed to give you beauty or wisdom. Ma Jenkins must be a poor excuse for a godmamma. She can't even give herself those things." I spoke to her as I sewed, because if I didn't, I would weep. Pipistrelle, my beautiful, darling Pipistrelle, lay curled on a bed of fallen leaves. He could have been sleeping because, in the dark, you couldn't see that he had been skinned.

I bound my nameless goddaughter to her new body with sutures of the only creature that had ever loved me completely, despite all sins.

"Even if something was wrong, you'd love the baby anyway?"

"Of course I would, sweetie."

All things have a price.

I couldn't give her beauty. All I had to offer was a monestrous, enchantment-stitched body made of dead children and grief, a forest for a playground and a life, hidden. I re-threaded the needle one last time.

"But Ma Jenkins can love you. Just like Ma Jenkins promised your mama she would--"

A single stitch.

And a soul found it had lungs and breath and voice and it wailed a reedy newborn cry to the dark.

"--that's all your godmama can give."

