THE PRESENT OF THE EVIL WITCH

A Mountain Tale

in three parts and twenty chapters

"A gift is not the same as a debt,

though they are sometimes the same shape,

and they are sometimes the same weight."

— a saying of the upper valleys

PART I

The Gift

CHAPTER ONE

The Wedding at Lindenholm

In the autumn that Marya Petrescu was nineteen, the village of Lindenholm prepared for a wedding it had been preparing for since she was twelve years old. The bride was Marya. The groom was Andrei Vassu, the son of the chandler, who had loved Marya since they had been children sharing a slate at the village school, and whom Marya had loved in return for exactly as long, although she had not used the word until she was sixteen and he had not used it until he was seventeen, by which time the matter had become so settled in everyone's expectation that the words themselves had been almost superfluous.

It was to be the largest wedding the village had seen since the war. The Petrescu family was not rich, but the Vassu family was not poor, and the priest at the small wooden church on the hill above the village had agreed to perform the ceremony in the old form, with the long candles and the crowns of myrtle and the seven blessings. The village baker had been baking bread since Tuesday. The fiddler from Kovasna had been engaged for a fortnight. There was to be wine from the southern slope and pickled cabbage in the great brown crocks, and a goose for every table, and a single white horse, borrowed from the

miller, on which Marya was to ride from her father's door to the church door at noon on the Saturday.

All of this had been planned. None of it had taken account of the woman in the grey shawl, because no one in Lindenholm had known about her, although she had been on the way to the wedding since the new moon.

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Marya stood at the window of the back bedroom on the Friday afternoon and watched the sky over the mountains turn from pewter to the colour of a bruise. Her sister Stefa was behind her, working at the lacing of the wedding bodice, which had been their mother's and was a half-inch too narrow at the waist for Marya, who was not stout but was made on a fuller plan than her mother had been.

"Stand still," Stefa said.

"I am still."

"You are not still. You are turning to look at the mountains. Hold your shoulders square. There."

"The mountains have a strange look this afternoon."

"The mountains have a strange look every afternoon in October. Hold still."

Marya held still. Stefa was twenty-three and married three years already, and she did everything in the manner of a woman who had taken charge of a small but important office. The bodice tightened a quarter-inch under her quick brown fingers and Marya breathed out and in again carefully.

From the kitchen below came the smell of the cabbage and the slow voice of their mother giving instructions to the cousin who had come up

from Bra□ov to help. From the yard came the unmistakable scrape of their father's axe on the chopping block; he had decided that morning that the wedding required an additional armful of split fir, although the kitchen stove had already been laid for two days. He was a man who, when he did not know what to do with his hands at a great occasion, split wood.

"Stefa."

"Yes."

"Have you ever — when you were going to be married — did you feel as if you had forgotten something?"

"Every day for a month. Stand still."

"What did you do?"

"I asked Mother. She said I had forgotten nothing of consequence and had remembered a great deal that would prove not to matter. She was correct on both counts."

"I do not feel as if I have forgotten something small. I feel as if I have forgotten something — large. As if there is a guest who has not yet arrived who ought to have been written to a month ago."

Stefa stopped lacing. She put her hands on Marya's shoulders and turned her gently from the window.

"Marya."

"Yes."

"You are going to be married tomorrow. To Andrei, whom you have wanted to marry since you were twelve. There is no guest who has not been invited. There is no thing you have forgotten. You are nervous. It is permitted to be nervous. It is, in fact, required. Now look at me and tell

me whether the seam over the heart is straight, because if it is not we are going to have to take it out and I would rather not."

Marya looked. The seam was straight. She told Stefa so. Stefa nodded once and continued with the lacing, and Marya turned her head no more than was necessary and did not look at the mountains again that afternoon.

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But she had not, in fact, been wrong.

At that hour, on the eastern road that came down from the high pass into the village, a woman was walking. She was perhaps forty years old, or perhaps sixty; the road was dusty and her face was in the shadow of a grey woollen shawl, and the women who passed her later, in the lower village, gave different accounts of her age and afterwards did not agree among themselves. She walked steadily, neither slow nor fast, with a small carved staff of black wood, and she carried under her left arm a flat wooden box wrapped in a square of red cloth tied with a length of straw twine.

She did not stop at the carter's house at the top of the village, although she would have been given water there. She did not stop at the well in the square. She walked the length of the high street, where the houses leaned together as old village houses do, and at the corner of the lane that ran up to the church she turned, instead, down the steep narrow lane that ran past the chandler's shop to the smithy and the river.

At the door of the Petrescu house, which was the third house from the bottom of the lane, she stopped.

She did not knock. She set the wooden box, in its red cloth, on the bottom step of the front door. She straightened. She looked up at the

upper window of the house, where a girl in a half-laced bodice was standing with her back to the glass; the woman could not, from the street, have seen the girl, and yet she looked at the window for a long moment as if she had.

Then she turned, and she walked back up the lane, and she was out of the village by sunset.

It was Marya's mother who found the box, half an hour later, when she opened the door to throw out the dishwater. She picked it up. It was lighter than it looked. There was no note. The red cloth was very clean, the straw twine very white, the wood of the box — when she unwrapped it on the kitchen table — a pale unfamiliar pine inlaid along the lid with a single small ring of black stars.

"A wedding present," said the cousin from Bra□ ov, who had come to the door behind her. "Open it."

"It is for Marya. It will wait."

"Mother, open it. It has the look of something nice."

Marya's mother set the box on the dresser. She would not, she said, open another person's wedding present in the kitchen without their leave. She would carry it up after supper. She did, in fact, mean to do this. She forgot. The cousin from Bra□ ov reminded her at nine o'clock and she said yes, yes, in a moment, and then she sat down at the kitchen table to rest her feet for what she thought would be a minute, and she fell asleep with her head on her arm, and the box stayed on the dresser, and Marya did not see it until the morning.

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CHAPTER TWO

The Present

Marya saw the box first thing in the morning, because her mother had at last remembered it at half past five, when she had come down to lay the kitchen fire, and had carried it up the stairs and set it on the chest of drawers in Marya's room while Marya was still asleep. When Marya woke at six the box was the first thing she saw, sitting square in the pale grey window-light, its little ring of black stars catching what little light there was.

She knew at once that she had not been told about it. Her mother and Stefa had told her about every wedding present in the house, partly out of pride and partly because they had wanted her to have her thank-you letters drafted ready for the Monday. There had been twenty-one presents up to last night. The list had not included a flat pale-wood box with a star inlay.

She sat up in the narrow bed she had slept in since she was a small child and looked at the box for some time before she got out of bed. The room was very cold. Her breath was visible.

When at last she did get up — quietly, because Stefa was sleeping on the truckle at the foot of the bed — she went to the chest of drawers in her stocking feet, and she lifted the box, and it was lighter than it should

have been. She turned it. There was no maker's mark. The lid was held by a small brass hook of the kind one sees on country cabinets, and the brass hook had no padlock.

She unfastened the hook. She lifted the lid.

Inside, on a folded square of black silk, lay a small object the size of a robin's egg.

It was a piece of carved wood, smooth and dark, with the dull glow of a thing that had been handled often by many hands over many years. It was shaped like a heart. Not the conventional heart of a valentine, nor yet the anatomical heart of a butcher's window, but something in between: rounder than the first, simpler than the second, the kind of heart a child might shape from soft pine with a kitchen knife. It had two small smooth lobes at the top and a single soft point at the bottom, and it was perhaps two inches from top to point, and it sat on the black silk as if it had been placed there with care.

There was no note. There was no card. There was no name.

Marya lifted it out. It was warmer than the room.

She turned it in her fingers. On the back of the heart, carved in a small neat hand into the dark wood, was a single word she did not at first recognise: KEEP. The letters were Latin, not Cyrillic. She read them again to be sure.

"What is that?"

Stefa had woken without Marya noticing. She was sitting up on the truckle in her white shift, her dark hair down over her shoulders, looking at the box and at the heart in Marya's palm with the small narrowed expression of a woman who had taken charge of an office and did not propose to be surprised in it.

"A present," said Marya. "Mother must have put it here."

"What present? From whom?"

"I do not know."

Stefa got out of the truckle and came over. She took the heart from Marya's hand and turned it over and read the word and frowned.

"It is not on the list," she said. "I made the list myself. I went round all the kitchen yesterday with Mother and we counted them and I wrote them down."

"It was not there yesterday."

"Then it was brought after supper. Mother will know."

She put the heart back in Marya's hand and went out of the room in her shift and bare feet, calling for their mother on the way down the stairs. Marya stayed at the chest of drawers, looking at the heart.

It was, she thought, a strange thing to give to a bride. Not unpleasant: she rather liked the shape of it, the smoothness, the soft warmth in her palm. But strange. A bride was given linen and silver, brass pots and a coverlet, perhaps a young hen or a sack of flour. A bride was not, in her grandmother's memory or in her mother's or in any wedding she herself had attended in seventeen years, given a small wooden heart with the word KEEP cut into the back of it.

She closed her fingers around it. It fitted her palm.

Stefa came back up the stairs more slowly than she had gone down. Their mother followed, in her morning apron, with the small worried look she carried whenever the wedding plan had been disturbed by even the smallest unexpected thing.

"The woman who left it," said her mother, "did not give a name. She did not knock. She set it on the step. I did not see her; I found it when I

went out to throw the dishwater. I should have brought it up to you last night. I am sorry. I forgot, with the cabbage."

"What woman?"

"I do not know, child. She did not knock."

"Did anyone see her in the village?"

Her mother thought.

"I shall ask at breakfast," she said. "Someone will have seen her on the road. It is, perhaps, a present from one of the families on the eastern side. There was a great-aunt of your father's on that road, but she has been dead these eight years. Perhaps her daughter. We shall find out."

She took the box from Marya's hand — gently, with no suggestion of confiscation — and turned it in her own hands, and looked at the inlay of black stars on the lid. She did not, Marya noticed, take the heart itself. She left it on Marya's open palm.

"It is a country thing," her mother said at last. "Not unpleasant. The wood is good. The carving is old. It was made, I should say, by someone's grandfather, and has been in a drawer for fifty years until the present occasion required it. People in these mountains keep such things. Hold on to it, child. We shall find out who sent it, and we shall write our thank-you letter, and that will be that. Now get dressed. The fiddler is here at ten."

She set the box back on the chest of drawers. She left the room.

Marya stood for a moment longer with the heart in her hand. Then, because she did not know what else to do with it and did not wish to put it away in a drawer on her wedding morning, she slipped it into the small inner pocket of the white linen shift she would wear under her bodice, where it lay warm against her ribs through the rest of the morning and through the wedding and through the long noisy afternoon of the feast.