

Exposure

Rabia Gale

She lay alone on the pallet, rigid, eyes wide open, staring into the dark, listening.

Slush, slosh, sloshity, slosh.

Cold wet falling from the sky, neither snow nor rain, splattering onto the slate roof, pooling into dimples and hollows, plastering his soft hair to his scalp, slithering snake-like down his cheeks, dripping, dripping, soaking his blanket, creeping through his clothes...

No.

She turned her thoughts, like the pages of a book, slamming shut one volume, opening another.

This morning. Yes, this morning.

This morning, waking up like normal... no, not quite normal because her husband had not been there. Had not been there for several nights.

She uncurled herself from around the baby, leaving him in his warm spot, swaddled in linen, eyelashes forming half-moons on his cheeks, his face still and smooth in deep sleep. She stared at him for just a heartbeat longer, than went about with her duties.

The world might stumble and crash, break into a million pieces, but the duties remained. Feeding animals, collecting eggs, milking the nanny-goat, shaping the bread dough, stirring the porridge.

At the door, a package, slipped there in the predawn darkness. Two loaves of raisin bread, warm and sweet-smelling, a wheel of cheese, a glass bottle of dandelion wine.

No one else came near the cottage all day, as if a knife had cut her home away from the rest of the world.

Her husband had not come in that night. She ran through possibilities in her mind: he was most likely drunk in the men's lodge, but he could have fled, he could be dead, he could be in bed with the Widow Ranea.

The litany crooned in her mind.

Dead. Fled. In bed. Dead or fled or in the Widow's bed.

Everyone in bed, while up on the hill, waiting...

She had sung to the baby that day, as he lay on sheepskin in a patch of sun, swiping at wooden toys hanging above him. Toys that had been carved by his great-grandfathers, features worn smooth, covered in teeth-marks from several dozen babies. His expression had been so determined, his feet kicking, his eyes crossed in concentration.

Her mending pooled into her lap as she paused, just for a moment, to watch. A break in her voice, a catch in her song. She fell silent, and took in that moment, storing it for later.

The slop and splatter of icy rain died away. Water tinkled from the eaves, pouring into puddles.

She strained to hear past the mutter of weather. Were winter-preparing bears about, snuffling in the high places? Coyotes, wild and lean, howling atop the hills?

Or maybe the bells of a sleigh, the snort and stamp of warm hairy reindeer, the cold glitter of diamond jewelry?

Was that a thin wail she heard amidst the sounds of water?

Oh please, hear and stop, Dark Lady. Hear and stop.

He cooed and burbled at her as she put away all his clothes into the big wooden chest against the wall. He jammed a fist into his mouth and sucked vigorously as she folded the soft faded linens, small small squares of cloth, buried them deep under her grandmother's wedding tunic and her mother's veil.

When she glanced his way and caught his eye, he smiled the toothless gummy smile of the baby, eyes alit, chubby cheeks spreading.

Another moment to savor and save, even if that look of loving trust twist like a knife in the heart.

She knelt in front of the tiny unshuttered window. Moonlight silvered the land; the stars showed their frosty hearts, coldly-burning in the sky. The other cottages were quiet, quiescent, even the men's lodge. Across from the village were the common lands, variegated strips of field and pasture, plowed under and dark. Sheep were darker humps against the darkness.

Beyond the fields were the trenches and the canals, a patchwork of channels in a mud quilt, and beyond them the high places.

The Seven Hills.

She stared at them for a long time, hoping to see some flicker, some sign of life. The swoop of an aerial sleigh, the gleam of a bejeweled cloak. Anxiety was a tight-coiled spring inside her, her eyes hurt, her cheeks, nose and ears were numb with cold, pins and needles stabbed her feet.

It was right that she should hurt. It was right that she should be cold, just as he was.

Just when she thought that she could not stand it anymore, that she must jump up and run for the hills or die from the ebb and flow of nervous feelings all over her, a movement.

In the shadows near the smith's, the last house, of the village.

Now that she had seen one, she caught sight of two, three, more. A dozen more, at least.

The men of the village, keeping watch. Guarding the village from the Dark Lady and her entourage.

Or to prevent anyone from leaving.

She withdrew and shuttered the window. Went back to her pallet. Lay down and once again her thoughts skittered backwards in time.

She nursed the baby in the early evening, as the sun was a low red orb in the sky. He was restless at first, arching his back to grin at her, pawing at her shirt. Then he settled and his eyes shut, his fingers closed around her own. They held hands as he fell into a light doze, still sucking, occasionally swallowing. She sat and stared at the wall, not looking at him, not looking at the soft spot pulse under his fine dark hair, not looking at his smooth cheek, red from body heat, or the chubby starfish of his hand.

She sat and did not think.

A knock at the door, weary but firm, stoic.

She broke the baby's latch, slipped him off and sat him up. "Come in." She half-turned towards the door, adjusted her clothing. Blinking owlishly, slouched over, curled around her arm, inspecting his own toes. There was a bald spot at the back of his head.

She would never see it grow over.

Her brother-in-law entered, hirsute, dour. He did not say anything, but stayed at the door, dressed in sheepskin coat and knee-high boots.

It was time.

The basket was ready and waiting by the door, the only indication that until now, a baby lived in the house. She put him in and he smiled at her, rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed, quietly curious. She tucked two blankets around him, pinning his arms to his side. He would wriggle his hands free soon enough, but it was cold outside, it would get colder as the night went on, maybe it would snow, the clouds had been leaden that day... She fussed with the blankets and his hat that she had knitted, as if anything she could do right now would change anything.

Would be of any use.

"Enough." Her brother-in-law was resigned, stern, a man who knew his duty. But underneath that the tough-love kindness of a man who would not let the agony stretch.

Her hands dropped, rested on soft wool for a moment. She ran one finger down the baby's petal-smooth cheek, rested it for two heartbeats on his small

chest. Then she put his favorite toy—a misshapen creature with leather-thong tentacles—on his blankets.

Stood up. Moved out of the way.

Why didn't he cry? Why did he look up at them with that beaming smile? Why did he start blowing bubbles, happy bubbles that spilled over his chin?

His blanket would be damp soon.

Why that bright look, that expectation that only good things happened to him? Why didn't his face crumple, why didn't he squeak out dismay as his uncle lifted up his basket?

Open door, boot scrunch, blast of cold wind, last glimpse of small baby face, eyes so bright, so brown and bright and curious, draft lifting hair and flicking shawl.

Door-slam.

She was alone.

And he was gone.

Gone.

So strange. So still.

She stood.

Empty.

She scrambles through the marshes, icy mud oozing into her boots, seeping through two layers of woolen socks. The sky has lightened, but there is still no color in the world, just shades of grey. She splashes through black water, soaking her skirts up to her knees.

The men watch her go, but do not try to stop her. Their vigilance has been only for the time that the Dark Lady journeyed. With the coming of the dawn, there is nothing to guard and no one to stop.

She slogs through the slush, up the hills. Seven of them, all sacred, but the one in the middle most sacred of all.

The Offering Place.

She stares at the mess of slush as she climbs its flanks, looking for signs.
Of bear paws and coyote prints and sleigh tracks.

Anything that might prepare her.

Almost to the top. One step, two step, now she can see.

Emptiness.

No, dark shadow at the corner of her eye. Jump for it, leap towards it, but
it is only a rock.

Not a basket.

She walks the summit, peers down one steep side to the river lying below,
with its ice-skimmed surface. Its still ice-skimmed surface.

There are no marks she can identify. No place where she could say a
basket had rested, no dropped jewel or glimmering feather to show that the Dark
Lady had been here, had accepted the offering of the village, the offering that
would give them respite from winter's harsh storms, from pangs of hunger and
pains of sickness.

Empty.

She stands.

Still. Silent.