

The Drifter and the Witches

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In a valley near a forested kingdom lay a small village. One day a young drifter came into the local tavern looking for work. He was a beautiful young man, with sultry eyes and black hair which he wore in a long thick braid down his back. He was told to inquire at the general store and there he saw a card nailed to the wall that said 'painter wanted'. He pulled the card and took it to the counter, asking the clerk if he knew about the job. The clerk replied that it was for a house outside of town where three old witches lived and that they were always in need of painters. The drifter was not superstitious and imagined the old women were being cast as witches by the townsfolk for whatever eccentric habits they might exhibit. So he hiked out past the edge of town to where their rust-colored house stood all alone on the top of a hill.

The old women were sisters, all petite in size. The eldest was generous of bosom and had the sharp eyes of a bird. Her name was Suna. The middle sister still had the body of a girl and eyes the color of jade. Her name was Cina. The youngest was dark of hair and eye and the smallest of the three. Her name was Juna. The old women farmed the land around their house and raised chickens. They butchered the chickens themselves and used every part of the birds. From the feathers they made pillows and pallet mattresses, from the beaks and talons they made tools to sell in the town store. The bones they crushed and used or sold as fertilizer and the blood they salted and stored in jars in the cellar. In this way they made a living and kept themselves fed.

The old women hired the young man, whose name was Juan, on the spot for five schillings a day. Suna gave him a bucket of paint and a brush and told him to paint the back of the house. He asked about cleaning and preparing the surface beforehand and she told him to suit himself. Wanting to do a proper job, he began to clean the wall and to his consternation, much of the existing paint and part of the wall came off in the process. He soon wished he'd left well enough alone.

At lunch time, Cina came out with a plate of sandwiches and a cool beverage and told him to take his ease in the shade and replenish himself. Grateful, Juan sat down and ate. The food was both plentiful and delicious and soon Juan became drowsy.

Cina came back in and told her sisters, "He is eating the food and will sleep all afternoon."

"I think we should make him our pleasure slave," said Juna. "He is quite fetching."

"I think we should keep him as our servant and make him do all our work," said Suna. "He is strong as an ox."

"I think we should eat him," said Cina, "he looks quite tasty."

The sisters really were witches and they argued all afternoon about what to do with the young man while he slept blissfully unaware outside in the shade of an old pear tree. At dusk he awoke, embarrassed and confused that he had slept the day through. He came to the back door and knocked. Cina answered and bid him come into the house.

"You will have to stay here tonight," she said. "It is too late for you to go back to town. It's best if you stay here the whole time, really. We can feed you while you paint and you can sleep on the daybed in the parlor. That way your work will go more quickly." She led him to a sturdy old wooden table in the middle of the kitchen and served him a bowl of chicken stew with sage and savory in a clay bowl.

Juan thought the arrangement sounded like a good deal and brought his belongings into the parlor after dinner. He wasn't very tired, having slept all afternoon so he pulled out his banjo and went to sit on the front porch. He played songs from the old country while the sisters slept, infusing their dreams with hope and heartbreak.

Later Juan awoke in the night to see a young woman standing in his room. Although he was startled, he watched with his steady dark eyes as she stepped toward his bed. She wore a gossamer gown and her hair and eyes were black as licorice. With either hand she lifted the straps of the diaphanous gown from her shoulders and let it fall to the floor. Juan pulled the covers down that she might join him, he not being one to look a gift horse in the mouth. He made love to her until dawn and finally dozed off. The rooster's crow woke him shortly thereafter and he looked around but there was no sign of the girl. At first he wondered if he only dreamed her but then he felt the delicious lassitude of the recently-sexed and shortly fell back asleep. When the rooster crowed for the third time, he dragged himself out of bed.

Suna made him a breakfast of oats and celery hearts and afterward he went outside to paint. The wall he had cleaned looked dreadful and while he was deciding what to do about it, Cina came out and looked at it with him.

"You just have to keep painting it," she explained. "If you clean it, you'll just clean the wall away." Then she looked at the young man's muscular arms and beautiful skin and said, "Tonight we'll make you a hot bath with sage and savory herb."

Juan looked at her, his expression dubious.

"It will cure you of any soreness from your work," Cina added.

Juan thanked her for her kindness and set to work applying more paint. It had a bad smell but little by little it restored the integrity of the wall, which soaked the liquid up like a sponge. That afternoon he moved onto the side of the house. This time he didn't clean it first but just applied more paint. He found a ladder in a small barn by the hen house and spent the afternoon painting under the eaves.

That evening when he came to the back door, Cina brought him to the bath, which was steaming and full of onions, carrots, sage and savory.

"The vegetables leech out toxins that could make you tough, I mean sore," she explained. "You can bathe and then we'll have dinner," and so saying, she left him alone.

Juan was somewhat doubtful about the medicinal effects of the vegetables but he stripped off his clothes and climbed into the tub. The hot water did indeed ease his muscles and the aromatic herbs were soothing. He suddenly felt very sleepy and was just starting to nod off when a brisk knock on the door roused him.

Suna barged in with a scowl and dumped a cup of powdered soap into the water.

"Can't get clean without soap!" she snapped and stomped out.

Juan saw Cina standing in the hall, tears spilling down her cheeks as Suna yanked the door closed. Raised voices drifted under the door as he washed up and rinsed off with water from the spigot. That night they ate bread and canned beans for dinner.

Once again the black-haired girl came to Juan in the night and the next day he could hardly keep his eyes open. Still he applied himself diligently and by the end of the day, he had the third side of the house finished. That evening he dined alone with Suna on roasted pork ribs and potatoes, the two other

sisters nowhere to be seen. As they dined, two blackbirds flapped and squawked in a cage on the sideboard and Juan asked Suna if they wouldn't break their own necks in captivity.

"Not if they know what's good for 'em," she quipped, looking pointedly at the cage. The birds calmed somewhat after that. Juan slept undisturbed that night and the next day he woke refreshed and a little relieved. The damsel was indeed fair but quite draining and he was concerned about possible repercussions. After all, he thought, nothing is given for free.

Suna silently served him a breakfast of oats with garlic and kale and sent him off to work on the front of the house where shortly he ran out of paint. He came to the back door and inquired whether he should go to town for more.

"Bring your buckets to the basement," Suna told him and he carried them down the narrow stairs into the cool root-scented darkness. Suna took jars from the shelf and opened them, pouring them into one of the buckets. The smell was horrendous.

"Pour some of that linseed oil in," she ordered.

Juan hefted a nearby jug and poured it in. Suna stirred up the mixture and then they filled the other bucket. When they were finished there were no more jars on the shelves but the wall was still lined with jugs of linseed oil.

The day was waning as Juan finished painting the front of the house. Once again he dined alone with Suna, this time on fried chicken and just-baked sourdough bread, with fresh peas from the garden. The two blackbirds glared at them from their cage.

"I should be going tomorrow, as I've finished painting today," Juan told Suna.

"I think not," she replied, "there is much painting left to be done and we have other work for you."

"But you have no more paint," Juan observed.

"We'll slaughter more chickens tomorrow. We'll have plenty of paint. You may leave when the work is finished."

This was disappointing news for Juan. He was ready to move on and was getting an uneasy feeling staying there. He decided to make a break for it that night and waited until he heard Suna go upstairs to bed. Then he tip-toed through the kitchen and took fifteen schillings from the jar on the counter where they kept their money. He opened the back door and out of mercy, went back and let the two blackbirds out of their cage. They flew out the door into the night, their cries like sobs on the wind. Juan hurried on down the road, never looking back and not stopping until he was on the other side of the valley.