



Henry Fuseli, 'The Shepherd's Dream',
from *Paradise Lost* (c. 1793).

The Stepmother's Tale

Lawrence Wilson

“A year and a day you must wait.” That’s what all the old folk of the village said, their eyes narrowing with something akin to fear, or uneasiness, or suspicion. And so a year and a day it was, a year and a day I waited, from the day that Jhon’s wife disappeared from their cottage (without a word or a sign to anyone!) to the day that Jhon and I were wed. A year and a day, and a long year it was, for me, the waiting, the wondering, the slow turning of Jhon’s heart from thoughts of mourning to thoughts of me. Six months passed, then eight, and finally I heard those longed-for words from Jhon’s own lips: “Aleen, will you be my wife?” Yes, praise the Lady, his heart wound was healing, the secret scar fading, and we could be happy together!

The village headwoman joined our hands with more than the usual ceremony and more than the usual blessing, and all through the wedding feast, I heard the low whispers, the murmurs behind hands, that Jhon’s first wife had been taken, that what the Good Folk took once, mightn’t they take again? That perhaps Jhon was not fated to keep any wife. But I smiled, I danced, I feasted and I laughed, for now I was married to Jhon, my Jhonni, the handsomest farmer in the township, tall and strong and steady. I felt safe enough in my bed at night, for though I could cook and clean and sew a neat thread, and though I was comely enough, I was never the ravishing fair beauty that Chrysa had been – no one else had had lips so red, a smile so winsome, and hair so yellow, a mane of pale curls spilling to her waist. No, I was as dun and dark-eyed as most of the farmers in these parts. Surely the Good Folk would have no interest in beguiling me away. If that was indeed what had happened – there are deep bogs around our village, dangerous marshes, and some women do go a-wandering in their wits, just after childbirth.

For not only was I Jhon’s wife, I was suddenly Jhonlin’s stepmother as well. A beautiful little boy, with his father’s bog-brown eyes and his mother’s wealth of bright curls. A beautiful boy indeed, and no trouble at all, for all that his mother had abandoned him in his cradle, and when my own son was born, and then my daughters, I raised our brood strictly and fairly and played no favourites, sharing out in equal parts the whacks to the bottom and the heart-warming hugs, and the brothers and sisters grew up with only love for each other in their hearts, and Jhonlin the most loving of the lot. Scarcely a summer’s day could go by without him bringing me a fistful of flowers from the meadow – the rich yellow sun-daisies that I loved best – and never an evening without his fair head resting on my knee at the fireside, begging a bedtime story. A loving husband and family, and the farm was prospering, the mustardseed oil and bog-cotton bringing in fine prices year after year; and no sickness lasted long, no droughts in summer, and the gentlest of snowfalls all the winters long. At least, so

I remember them. But I am old now, and long steeped in sin, and perhaps my memory plays tricks on me, like the will-o'-the-wisp in the marshes leading travellers astray.

No, I will not believe that! It was a good life, and we were happy. Jhon was a contented man. If he still mourned the vanished Chrysa, he gave no sign of it to me.

But then Jhonlin turned seven years old, and Chrysa came back.

It was in the autumn time, the golden time, the harvest almost in, and just one day until the Turning Day of the year; the beginning of the dark season, when the sun goes somersaulting down into winter; the day when the old folk in the marsh-villages say that the dead go walking, that the Good Folk go riding from their summer palace on the Lady's Island to their winter castle in the mountains. Turning Eve, and as I slept beside my husband, I tossed and turned with evil dreams of clutching hands, of claws and screams and sharp blades thrusting. I woke with a start to find Jhon's side of the bed empty, and from somewhere – outside the house? inside my own head? – I heard a voice calling, a voice singing, sweet and pure and high. My heart was beating hard in my breast as I crept to the window and parted the curtain – just a sliver! just a crack! – and peered out, my breath catching in my throat for fear.

A fear which doubled, trebled, when I saw below, lit by fitful moonlight through fast-scudding clouds, standing still as if bound by wire, my husband, my Jhon, hands clenched into fists by his side, standing at the gate into the wide pasture we called Thornapple for its wealth of prickle-bushes, rooted to the ground but staring, staring, over the gate and into the field at the figure of a tall woman, cloaked and hooded against the frisking wind.

Her hair, where the wind had tugged it from its binding, was an arm-span long, curly as wood-shavings, and silver-pale in the silvering moonlight. I knew her by that hair: I knew what colour it would be by daylight: yellow, rich yellow, bright yellow, yellow as daisies, yellow as the sun. It was Chrysa, by the merciful Lady! Singing in that winsome voice of hers, but with a new power to it, somehow, a new hook, an enchantment which terrified me even as it fascinated my husband. With a trembling hand, I opened the casement a finger's width, for she was speaking.

"Not a word, Jhon, for my time is short. Tomorrow it will be seven years and seven days since I was kidnapped from your side, seven years and seven days of nursing the wee sickly babes of the Good Folk, seven years and seven days of this endless waking nightmare and this endless waking dream. Tomorrow night at midnight, the Host shall ride the Old Way, over marsh and bog, over stone and thorn, and if you would have me back, watch for the passing of the Folk at the crossroads by the Holi Stone. If you would have me back, there are four things you must do without fail from the moment the sun sets: eat no meal, wear no shoes, speak not a single word, and touch not any metal, not gold nor silver, not bronze nor iron, lest the charm go awry. Then when the very last of the Host are passing, you must leap up and seize the bridle of the hindmost horse, a piebald mare, which I shall be riding. Do not let go, whatever the Folk might say or whatever the Folk might do, or I will be lost to you forever. Oh Jhon, oh my love, do not fail me!"

And with a fading cry that was like an echo of her enticing song, she flung her shadowy cloak about her and vanished. Where Chrysa had seemed to stand there was no footprint nor mark, though my Jhon, suddenly free of whatever enchantment had held him, knelt long in the grass there, searching with trembling hands in the eerie moonlight.

I, too, felt shivered and shaken by the tale revealed by the long-vanished woman. Taken by the Folk! An evil fate, for all the jeweled splendour which the Good People were rumoured to possess. Nursemaid, plaything, slave! If she might be rescued, then she must be rescued, returned to her place in the village ... ah, but here my heart gripped tight and, some might say, froze solid. Returned? Returned to what place? To this house? To this man? What, then, of me, and what of the children?

Scarcely breathing, I eased the window shut and closed the curtain on the sight of Jhon, still on his knees by the gatepost. I was careful to make no sound, and so I heard – or thought I heard – the quiet *snick!* of another window closing. From the children's room upstairs?

It was some time before my husband came back to bed. I do not think he slept at all, the rest of that night. Nor did I, but we spoke no word between us, and I think that he was scarcely aware that I lay there beside him.

Sunset comes early on Turning Eve.

I do not remember how I got through that day. I must have fed my family, baked the bread, washed the clothes and the dishes, but I do not remember. Jhon must have gone to the barn, milked the cows, hurried into the fields for the last of the harvest, but I do not remember. Jhonlin, I think, must have taken it upon himself to keep the younger ones quiet, and out of the way of their silent and strange and blank-eyed mother. Just before sunset I came to myself, seated by the fire, eyes stinging, needle and thread in my hand and a tumble of forgotten mending in my lap. A mug of sweet, milky tea was gently steaming at my elbow, but I do not remember pouring it. Jhonlin had the thimbles out of my sewing basket and was entertaining the littler ones with a tappity-tap fingerdance, but I do not remember him rummaging through the needles and spools of thread.

The evening light was heavy and level and golden-yellow – a horrid time of day, one I have never liked since, the world turning yellow, wicked yellow, alluring yellow – and there was a good dinner simmering in the pot, surely tempting to a man who'd been working all day in the grain-field. Surely he'd eat, and spoil the charm? Within my breast my heart grew colder and smaller with each passing breath. When Jhon came through the door from their fields, all our eyes turned to him. He did not smile. Nor did we.

"There's stew, Da," Jhonlin said, his voice trembling, as mine would have, could I have spoken aloud. "And fresh bread, and honey."

"I won't be eating, son," Jhon said, and that was all he said, for through the open door we all saw the yellowy-red globe of the sun touch the rim of the world, and Jhon's mouth clamped shut as if his teeth were bolted together. The children watched, wide-eyed, as their father removed his heavy hobnailed work-boots, his wide belt with its bronze buckle, his thick

homespun jacket with its brass buttons, and the silver chain and luck-charm from around his neck. With a grimace of apology for me, he slowly slid the gold wedding ring from his left hand and left it with the other metal items on the bench by the door.

Slowly, terribly slowly, he hugged each child. The little ones knew that something was strange and queer this night, but none of them whispered a word or a question. Jhonlin clung to his father the longest, not speaking, tears streaking his cheeks, then herded the younger ones ahead of him, up the stairs to bed.

Jhon opened his arms to me, and I, suddenly unfrozen, leaped up from my rocking chair, scattering the pile of mending, and buried my face in his neck. I gripped him so tightly, you'd think no man, however strong his arms, would have been able to pull away! But he did. Jhon loosened my clutching hands, gently wiped my tearstained cheeks, and turned to go.

With a cry, I embraced him again. He made a noise in his throat, almost growling, almost frowning. His face was very still, very sad, but there was something else there as well, a kind of – excitement? Anticipation?

I let Jhon put me aside. But before I loosened my hug – Lady forgive me! – before I let him go, I slipped the slim, sharp steel mending needle, held forgotten between my thumb and forefinger, through the rough fabric at the back of his collar, and left it there.

Sunset comes early on Turning Eve, and it is a long time from sunset until the dawning, and if I had sleepwalked through the day, I paid for it that night, awake, aching and exhaustingly awake, rocking in my chair, staring at the ebbing fire, not crying, not speaking, but with the pulse in my veins as loud and painful as hoofbeats, as whip-blows. I tell you true when I say that my only thoughts were a droning, heavy, unrepentant prayer: Lady, Lady, don't let her take my man. Lady, Lady... The rocker creaked, the wind brushed tree-fingers against the cottage windows, and once upstairs a child cried out in a bad dream. Below, locked in my own bad dream, I did not move. I did not speak. I rocked, and I prayed. Lady, Lady...

(Sometimes, as the years have turned, I have thought that such prayers must be a sin, a wicked selfishness. Other times I have felt that they are just the way it is, the way we are, and that the Lady in Her wisdom knows that we cannot help but pray them, anymore than we can keep from freckling in the summer sunlight.)

In the first silver-grey dawnlight of Turning morn, there came a scrabbling sound at the latch. I rose stiffly and crept to the door, pained in knee and hip and neck, to find Jhon, my Jhon, leaning there, his clothes heavy with dew, his bare feet run bloody, his eyes wide and unseeing. He did not speak. I do not think he saw me, even, not then and not for many days.

He was alone. Praise the Lady, he was alone!

I found young Jhonlin at my elbow, nervous and silent, and between the two of us, we managed to get Jhon up the narrow stairs and into bed. He collapsed like a dead man, but he breathed. I watched him, scarcely leaving his bedside. He slept. He breathed. I watched him, and held one of his wide, calloused hands gripped tightly in mine. Jhonlin managed breakfast for the younger ones, fed and watered the stock, gathered the eggs. When he

brought me a mug of soup at midmorning, I could unbend enough to find a smile for him, and a quick hug. My Jhonlin. My son. My son. Mine forever; now.

For when I'd stripped my husband of his sodden clothing, taking care to remove my secret needle from the collar of his shirt, I'd pricked my finger on a second needle, caught and hidden in a fold of the fabric, lower down, waist-high – about as high as Jhonlin might reach, hugging his father goodbye on a frightening Turning Eve.

Jhon kept to his bed for a week, and for many weeks after he crept about the farm like an old, stiff-jointed man. He would not speak, and scarcely ate, and he grew dangerously thin. But even a heart scarred as badly as my Jhon's must someday heal, and between the children's artless, endless chatter and Jhonlin's sturdy patience and my rich cooking, he grew healthy again, and even stout, as the years passed. He was ever a quiet man, prone to stillness and a distant-eyed, brooding listening, and though he took to drinking more ale than was good for him, we were happy enough together; a happy family once again, and when he died, the whole township mourned him.

Now I am an old woman, rocking in the same chair before the same fireplace. My daughters married decent men on distant farmlands, and they visit me twice a year, perhaps, at Yule and at Midsummer. My younger son went away to one of the Queen's wars, and fought bravely, so his captain told me, and some days, when the mood is upon me, I open the small carved box which holds his shiny medals, and have a bit of a cry. But it is Jhonlin, my brave little Jhonlin – ah, not so little now! As tall and as broad of shoulder as his father ever was, with silver threaded into his golden beard, and a little pillow of belly riding soft behind his belt-buckle! – who comforts my days now, bringing me tea by the fire and hot possets at bedtime, Jhonlin who married a bright and pretty wife who blessed me with five fine grandchildren, Jhonlin who tends the fields and the flocks, puts food on the table and money in the strongbox. Jhonlin, a brave and loving lad grown to be a brave and loving man, who, as the years turn, likes to hold my hand as I rock and remember before the fire, silent as his father was, but content with his lot, and smiling more than his father ever could.

We never speak of it, Jhonlin and I, as my Jhon never spoke of what had happened that night at the crossroads by the Holi Stone. My daughters and my daughter-of-love know nothing, the neighbours know nothing, and the grandchildren have other stories to beg for at bedtime. I tell this tale now only because I know, and Jhonlin knows, that soon the year will come turning for me one last time. I feel it in the grip of his hand as I rock before the bright fire, and – Lady forgive us! – I know that we did right, that night, he and I. We did right.

So let us go guiltless into Her embrace, with no forsaken woman's vengeful spirit forbidding us the Gate! But just in case, just to be sure, I have asked, and Jhonlin has promised, that I shall be buried with a sharp new steel needle pinning closed the collar of my dress. With that I shall have to be content, and pray the Lady's blessing.

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