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# A Sketch and a Poem

## Old Mommie Witch

UP IN THE BACK ROOM the voices from the yard were whispers and rustlings, and in the bed whose four posters boxed her room the woman heard them. They murmured across the pain threatening the womb like leaves tapping the window-edge of storm. She shifted toward the dry, reminiscent voice at her side—her husband's voice thinned to a reed—and listened to his mother:

"When I was carrying Len . . . when I . . ."

The leaves, tapping, scraped; and the younger woman drew down the corners of her mouth in pain. Up and down a subdued octave the outward voices drifted and blended at last to a monody that swelled and hovered in the distillate light of that evening:

"Old mommie witch . . . old mommie witch . . ."

The incantation wakened a memory older than the room and thinner than the lingering light.

"Isn't it time for the children to come in?" she asked fearfully. "Why doesn't Len get them in?"

"Lie still, dear . . . don't fret," the grandmother touched her forehead, "he's calling the cab now."

Down the yard the chanting fell, and a tapping detached itself from that rhythm and pattered, an extension of the receding song and light, down the yard.

"There goes one of them . . . that's Kennet . . . oh, tell Len or he'll get out . . ."

Within the womb the child lurched. In her eyes the bedposts shuddered, and the barbaric jangling of the telephone dislocated the room—its plaid hangings and subdued lights—further from reality. The plaintive shuttle of the voices of her children swelled, and the little steps were lost. Angry love and a fierce and primitive fear, the chorus and the sentinel light; and from this, though it cost a life, no child must be lost.

She cried.

"Look for him; look for him!"

The grandmother left, and she was alone with the detached, swaying, haunting trill in the shadow beyond; and with the unknown weight of incipient years within.

"Old mommie witch, fell in a ditch, picked up a penny and thought she was rich . . ."

### II

At the base of the box hedge by the gate he could pry himself through. For a moment he was caught, and he lay with his face in the pungent damp earthsmell, listening to the voices and tapping his foot against the root of the hedge to the swell and fall of the chant. He hummed in a tuneless monotone to the drifts and pauses of the song in the yard. *Da-da-dada . . .*

# By Claude F. Koch

*Kennet, Kennet*, over his shoulder, hidden, as he pulled through the hedge, the voice of the old lady who held and rocked him warm cut the chant, and he smiled and nodded his tuneless song. The alley stretched fifty yards to a gaslight beyond which the sullen traffic distantly jarred. But here birds flew off at the height of his head from hedges warped by old wind, and he pointed awkwardly and curiously toward their flight. A peach, larger than his hand, hung from a limb that brushed his head and he pulled at it. Spreading his legs he rocked past the peach tree toward the gas light far in the future—*da-da-dada . . . da-da-dada . . .*

The light dissipated and the lamp grew larger, while from all the secret and ancient crevices, and out of the indentations that his light step pressed into the earth, rose the bruised and pungent lingering harbingers of future memory. Mint and clover and clematis closed him in securely. A tuneless insect joined his song, and he rocked to a pause and listened to it, his head tilted to catch the dull note, his hand outstretched to gather in the form whirling past. Behind him the latch of the gate clicked open and he heard the voice, sharper and demanding as he pressed against the scratching hedge, "Kennet, Kennet!"

And then, questioning, "Kennet?"

He backed his bottom against the hedge, playing with his smile and comprehending eyes toward the

sound of the voice and the other voices humming beyond, and the mother waiting in the room of plaids and white sheets and scents higher still beyond. He was a conspirator in their ancient game.

Then the gate closed again, and the alley opened infinitely toward all the fragrant prisons of the earth, outward beyond the gaslamp, and up with the sorcerer birds through the peach boughs. The steps of his grandmother faded up the alley. Calling, "Kennet? Kennet?"

He sat placidly in the thick, bitter grass under the hedge and dug with a hesitant thumb in the sandy surface of the alley, carrying the abrasive crumbs to his mouth. Over his shoulder the house was a presence that whispered and warmed and stayed with him—even as he lurched with a wry face to his hands and knees, and up on his feet again. He followed a moth toward the gas lamp.

### III

The husband was mounting the stairs.

"Dorie!" he called, "get ready, cab's downstairs. Dorie!"

His voice was unnaturally loud, and in the suspended silence as it drifted away she could hear only his hurried step and a distant "Kennet?". The other voices that were tied to other nights and all to this, were stilled in the yard. She struggled to a sitting position on the side of the bed.

He entered and stooped for the

suitcase, and when he looked up it was to peer anxiously at the tears in her eyes.

"Dorie. What?"

"Where are the children, where are they?"

"Why, in the yard; don't worry about them."

"The baby's out . . . I'm afraid for them . . . it's dark . . ."

She sat awkwardly, trying to penetrate the darkened glass across the room. What was falling away; what hold on the weave of the present loosening and she leaving them—dispersed like the voices into the waiting evening? She felt discarded, carrying alone a resentful life. These strangers: she looked at her husband, withdrawn from her; and out the window again.

"Oh, Kennet's gone." She arose, an ungainly figure, catching at the slim and swaying post of the bed.

The hall directed her away from them. Her husband was a shadow

at her side. The house seemed to anticipate her descending steps; a hinge scratched and the rear door clapped to. They were in the foyer and the door was open to the expectant night.

"They were singing; why did they stop," she said.

They got into the cab.

The cab was drawn away across the gravel drive; its taillight lost down the demanding street. Then, quietly and mounting ritualistically, isolating the house from the understandable darkness around it, from the yard the children's voices grew again:

"Old mommie witch . . . old mommie witch . . ."

And in the hedge by the steps, a thin, monotonous little voice repeated, "da-da-dada . . . da-da-dada . . ."

And closer came the steps, "Kennet? Kennet?"

The moth tapped the lighted door.

## ***Song of the Mad Tinker***

Woodlands that slumber  
In this sly season,  
Ungathered lumber  
Left beyond reason,  
Untapped sweet maple,  
Uncut soft popple,  
Mellowing barnbeam,  
Rotting fence staple,  
Mildewing apple,  
Unpainted steeple;  
Hung from the crosstrees  
Web of the spider:  
Where is the life that  
Sparkled like cider?

God! Has the lean rat  
Burrowed the larder?  
Have all the people  
Under their warder  
Passed like the summer  
Into this charnel  
Season, sans house?  
*Cursed be the dark land  
By bell, book, and candle!*  
O, I am lonely—  
Spell me the reason  
Is it the season  
And me wandering only?