Opening extract from

Witch Child

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entry 1 (early march? 1659)

I am Mary.

I am a witch. Or so some would call me. 'Spawn of the Devil', 'Witch child', they hiss in the street, although I know neither father or mother. I know only my grandmother, Eliza Nuttall; Mother Nuttall to her neighbours. She brought me up from a baby. If she knew who my parents are, she has not told me.

'Daughter of the Erl King and the Elfen Queen, that's who you are.'

We live in a small cottage on the very edge of the forest, Grandmother, me and her cat and my rabbit. Lived. Live there no more.

Men came and dragged her away. Men in black coats and hats as tall as steeples. They skewered the cat on a pike, they smashed the rabbit's skull by hitting him against the wall. They said that these were not God's creatures but familiars, the Devil himself in disguise. They threw the mess of fur and flesh on to the midden and threatened to do the same to me, to her, if she did not confess her sins to them.

They took her away then.

She was locked in the keep for more than a week. First they 'walked' her, marching her up and down, up and down between them, for a day and a night until she could no longer hobble, her feet all bloody and swollen. She would not confess. So they set about to prove she was a witch. They called a woman, a Witch Pricker, who stabbed her all over with long pins, probing for the spot that was numb, where no blood

ran, the place where the familiars fed. The men watched as the woman did this and my grandmother was forced to stand before their gloating eyes, a naked old lady, deprived of modesty, dignity, the blood streaming down her withered body, and still she would not confess.

They decided to float her. They had plenty of evidence against her, you see. Plenty. All week folk had been coming to them with accusations. How she had overlooked them, bringing sickness to their livestock and families; how she had used magic, sticking pins in wax figures to bring on affliction; how she transformed herself and roamed the country for miles around as a great hare, how she did this by the use of ointment made from melted corpse fat. They questioned me. Demanding, 'Is this so?' She slept in the bed next to me every night. How do I know where she went when sleep took her?

It was all lies. Nonsense and lies.

These people accusing her, they were our friends, our neighbours. They had gone to *her,* pleading with *her* for help with beasts and children, sick or injured, a wife nearing her time. For she had the skill, in herbs, potions, in her hands, but the power came from in her, not from the Devil. The people trusted her, or they had until now, they had wanted her presence. Birth or death, my grandmother was asked to be there to assist in the passage from one world to the next.

They were all there for the swimming, standing both sides of the river, lining the bridge, staring down at the place, a wide pool where the water shows black and deep. The men in tall hats dragged my grandmother from the stinking hole where they had

been keeping her. They cross bound her, tying her right toe to her left thumb, and vice versa, making sure the cords were thin and taut. Then they threw her in. The crowd watched in silence, the only sound the shuffle of many feet edging forwards to see what she would do.

'She floats!'

The chant started with just one person remarking, in a quiet voice almost of wonder, then it spread from one to another, until all were shouting with one voice, like some monstrous howling thing. To float was a sure proof of guilt. They hooked her, pulling her back to shore like a bundle of old washing. They did not want her drowning, because that would deprive the people of a hanging.

entry 2

It is a cold day, even for early spring. White frost on the ground and green barely touching the trees, but folk come from far and near for the hanging. They crowd the market square worse than Mop Day.

It is dangerous for me to be there. I see them glancing and whispering, 'That's her, the granddaughter', 'daughter of the Devil, more like', then they turn away, sniggering, hands covering their mouths, faces turning red at the lewd images they conjure in their own mind's eye. The evil is in themselves.

I should flee, get away. They will turn on me next unless I go. But where to? What am I to do? Get lost. Die in the forest. I look around. Eyes, hard with

hatred, slide from mine. Mouths twitch between leering and sneering. I will not run away into the forest because that is what they want me to do.

I keep my eyes forward now, staring at the gallows. They have hammered away for a night and a day putting it up. You can smell the fresh cut wood even where I am at the back of the crowd.

What powers do they think we have, my grandmother and I? If she had real power, would she not be able to undo the locks to their stinking dungeon and fly through the air to safety? Would she not call up her master, Satan, to blast and shrivel them to dust and powder? And if *I* had any powers, any at all, I would destroy them all, right here and now. I would turn them into a mass of fornicating toads. I would turn them into leprous blind newts and set them to eat themselves. I would cover their bodies with suppurating plague sores. I would curse them from generation to generation, down through the ages, so their children and their children's children bore gaggling half-wits. I would addle their heads, curdling, corrupting the insides of their skulls until their brains dripped from their noses like bloody mucus ...

I was so lost in my curses that only the sudden silence of the crowd brought me back to what was about to happen. Black figures stood on the pale boards, silhouetted against the white of the sky: Witchfinder, Minister, Hangman. In the unexpected quiet, a sneeze sounded loud. Obadiah Wilson's thin figure bent forward, suddenly convulsed. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and held it to his face as sneeze after sneeze racked him. When he took it away

the crowd drew breath, blood bloomed thick and red on the snow white linen. It was the only colour on the whole platform.

My grandmother was brought forward for all the crowd to see. She was held, arms pinioned behind her, and pushed to the foot of the ladder which leant against the gallows tree. She ignored the eyes on her, looking over the upturned heads, searching for me. Her eyes found mine and she smiled. Her glance went sideways to Obadiah Wilson, self-appointed Witchfinder, trying to staunch the blood pouring from his nostrils and she nodded very slightly, as if to say 'well done'. She nodded again to someone behind me.

That was the last I saw of her. The hangman stepped forward, hood raised to cover her face, and at the same time a cloak closed around me. I was taken down one of the steep alleys leading from the market and was stepping into a waiting carriage when I heard the crowd's roar.

entry 3

The woman sitting opposite me said not a word, nor I to her. She stared out of the window, studying the passing scene while I studied her. She was obviously a lady, richly apparelled. Her cloak was soft dark wool fastened at the throat with a silver clasp and chain; her dress was green silk velvet, the shifting shade of young beech leaves turning in a spring wind. Her hands were gloved, her fingers long and thin and

beneath the soft leather I could see the bulge of many rings. Her face was veiled. Black gauze as fine as mist obscured her features, but I could see enough to know that she was young and comely. Her skin was pale and I could make out the shadowed jut of high cheek-bones and the curve of finely moulded lips. I could not see her eyes and, anyway, they were not upon me. They stared outwards steadily.

If she was aware of my scrutiny, she showed no sign of it and made no comment as the coach rumbled on. I wondered if she stared out to look for robbers, for these are lawless times, the roads infested with bands of soldiers left over from both armies, and other roaming packs of sundry vagabonds. Many are fearful to travel, and she made no attempt to hide her wealth.

She did not seem inclined to tell me who she was and I did not ask her. In my mind, an old rhyme began to chime. As we travelled onwards, the wheels of the carriage took up the rhythm:

'In the town live witches nine, three in worsted, three in rags, and three in velvet fine ... '