

*No. 10*

*Sweet Home*

By Carys Bray

Of course no-one accused the old woman of being a witch. But she was foreign. Her words were ground and percolated as they seeped up the tunnel of her throat, espresso-thick and strong. People were inclined to duck as she coughed language at them. Bad weather had eroded her face. Some believed that the sun had crisped her skin into coriaceous pleats. Others blamed the chaw of a wintery climate. No-one knew where she had come from, though lots of people privately thought that perhaps she ought to go back there.

No-one was interested in the small parcel of woodland until the old woman bought it. The wood grew at the edge of the village, at the brink of awareness. For most people its existence was an abstract, though fleetingly pleasant local detail.

After the old woman's visit to the estate agent, everyone suddenly began to talk about conservation. They shook their heads and tutted as they wrapped their mouths around unfamiliar words like *heritage* and *legacy*. Remarks about the wellbeing of red squirrels and dormice speckled habitual conversations about the weather. People became overnight experts on the preservation of indigenous wildflowers. There was speculation that ghost orchids and wild gladiolus grew in the wood, leading to claims that it should have been categorized as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, its sale accordingly prevented.

Following the completion of the sale, the old woman bought a tent from the camping shop on the High Street. Then she trudged down the B road to her new acquisition. She was followed, several

days later, by a foreign removal truck, leading people to mutter darkly about planning permission and residential dwellings. A few especially indignant individuals pursued the truck and stood at the edge of the wood and watched the tail lift lower to reveal a colossal, black, antique stove, crouching fatly on ball and claw legs. Three men emerged from the back of the truck and, along with the driver, moved the stove onto the woodland floor. The tail lift was raised and lowered a second time to reveal several sacks of flour, numerous Tupperware containers, a stepladder, an axe, a shovel and a chicken coop.

During the days that followed, everyone kept an eye on the B road. They were disappointed not to observe flatbed lorries stacked with building supplies, speedy white trade vans or even a removal truck containing the rest of the old woman's possessions. Although no such vehicles were observed, the old woman's intentions were perfectly plain and people were clearly obliged to report her to the authorities.

The Planning Office couldn't cope with the volume of phone calls. Public sector redundancies had culled all but one of the secretaries and she didn't have either the time or the inclination to politely log numerous versions of the same complaint. After ten similar objections, the phone was switched to answer machine and a Planning Officer was despatched to investigate as a matter of urgency.

The Planning Officer wasn't one to talk. But on his way back from the wood he stopped off at the pub for a drink and felt that he ought to reveal that the old woman was indeed planning to build in

the wood. However, as the structure would not be permanent, there was nothing he could do about it. He was also compelled to disclose that the old woman had applied for a coppice grant worth £500, money which would surely be better spent on honest, hardworking, English people. And while he had a captive audience, he made an eloquent speech about the inadequacies of the coalition government. When he'd finished he called a taxi because he was a responsible drinker: he'd claim for it later on expenses.

The old woman built her house around the stove. She dug out foundations with a shovel and filled the trenches with slow-baked slabs of salt dough and buckets of oozy sugar paste. She cooked thick gingerbread bricks and glazed them with glacé icing which set hard during the cool, wood-shaded evenings. Paper-thin slices of gelatine were latticed into windows, crisscrossed by steady chords of ganache. She constructed a roof out of Linzertorte squares and piped meringue along every join. The midday sun hardened the egg-white mortar into stiff, crispy peaks. When she had finished, she sat on her gingerbread porch modelling tiny flowers out of fondant. She dyed them using wild onion skins, beetroot and hollyhock petals and placed them in gingerbread window boxes.

It was only when the postman had to deliver a package addressed to The Gingerbread House using a postcode which indicated the wood at the margin of the village that people heard about what the old woman had done. People chatted about it in the

Post Office, discussed it in the pub and then sauntered down the B road on the pretext of getting some fresh air.

The gingerbread house was set back from the road by several hundred feet, but was just about visible from the path through the criss-cross of foliage and branches. A crowd gathered at the edge of the wood, their exclamations rising in a whip-swirl of disquiet.

‘It looks like gingerbread.’

‘You don’t think she’s a...’

‘She should have used an English recipe.’

‘Like shortbread.’

‘I don’t think shortbread –’

‘Or Swiss roll.’

‘Isn’t Swiss roll from –’

‘Victoria sponge, then. You can’t get more English than that.’

‘It’s not in character with the village.’

‘Is this a conservation area? Are we in a conservation area? Maybe the Planning Officer can make her take it down.’

‘I don’t think so. He said not, although I doubt he realised that she was intending *this*.’

‘It’s unhygienic. Don’t you think it’s unhygienic? It’ll attract mice and rats.’

‘Will she pay council tax? I bet she won’t.’

‘How about home insurance?’

‘What could she insure it against – compulsive eaters?’

‘I need a drink, anyone up for a quick half?’

It would not be true to state that everyone grew used to the gingerbread house. However it did become a hard fact of people's existence, like gastritis or heartburn.

The old woman often walked along the B road to the High Street and back again, carrying supermarket carrier bags packed with butter, sugar and glycerine. She walked slowly, the 's' of her spine concertinaing into a tortile 'z' as she hefted her shopping. Occasionally people passed her, but no-one offered to help.

In the weeks and months that followed, no-one's milk soured. No-one's allotment crop failed and the weather was typical of early and subsequently late autumn. But as winter approached, the Post Office closed down and the high-speed broadband connection date was postponed. In the week before Christmas the sky tipped a foot of snow over the village and hundreds of condensing boilers failed. In the New Year VAT went up to 20%. And everyone began to see a pattern in the configuration of events. They began to believe that the old woman's arrival had catalysed their misfortunes.

The quiet in the wood was welcome and calming. The passage of time was determined by the seasons rather than hours and minutes. The old woman found that she was pleasantly busy. Every day she tended to her chickens, chopped logs for the stove and maintained and repaired her house. The heavy snowfall limited her activities and trips to the supermarket were suddenly difficult. But the stove belted out

plenty of heat and she watched the flames osculating like tongues behind its wide glass mouth as she relaxed in her lebkuchen chair.

It was after the snow began to melt that the old woman noticed the damage to her house. She was on her way out to the supermarket to look for blocks of insulating marzipan in the January sale when she observed that the decorative sugar work on the external lintels had been removed. She paced the perimeter of the house and discovered that caramelised sugar swirls had been broken off the window shutters. Gumpaste flowers and butterflies had been disconnected from the fondant ivy and several gingerbread bricks had nibbles gnawed out of them.

The old woman made her way along the B road to the High Street. It was hectic in the supermarket. Everyone was extremely busy buying lots of reduced price items that they didn't need. The old woman filled a basket with slabs of discounted marzipan and joined the long queue for the checkout. When it was almost time for her to pay, she turned to address the line of customers behind her.

'Please tell your children to stop vandilizationing my house.' The old woman's words rattled out of her throat, colliding with people's ears.

'She's definitely German,' someone whispered. 'Only a German could invent such a long word, and they don't know how to behave in queues either.'

'Do you have any proof?' one of the shoppers asked.

'Our children wouldn't do such a thing,' said another.

‘Even if they did, you couldn’t blame them. Everything’s so expensive. With the post office gone there’s nowhere to buy penny sweets,’ a third rejoined.

‘And it’s partly your fault,’ a fourth bargain-hunter accused. ‘Are you trying to lure kids to your house, or what?’

‘You are rationalizing,’ the old woman replied. ‘What if I was to shatter-smash *your* houses?’

The clatter of her consonants caused shoppers who weren’t in the queue to turn and stare.

‘It’s not a proper house anyway,’ someone called bravely from the cigarette kiosk as the old woman paid and left the shop.

Everyone remembered the old woman’s outburst the following week when two children went missing: they rehearsed her aggression and her threatening behaviour. Of course, no-one knew how the story landed on the front page of the *Daily Mail* alongside a photograph of the old woman’s grizzled face. The children were found. However, their short-lived absence tailed the old woman and people buttressed their dislike of her with fear.

The quiet in the wood was heavy and deadening. The old woman stayed indoors as much as possible, despite her increased need for materials to repair the escalating vandalism to her property. She ventured outside to chop logs, but otherwise kept warm by the stove, calling out a precautionary, ‘go away’ every so often.

She didn't hear the children approach; she heard the soft snaps as fondant flowers were plucked from her window box. She rose to her feet and opened the gingerbread door. Outside a boy and girl were gobbling the delicate decorations.

'I wish you would not be eating my house,' she said. 'Please, go away.'

The children paused to consider her.

'People are scared of you,' said the boy, cautiously.

The old woman nodded.

'You *are* a bit strange,' added the girl.

'Are you a wicked witch?' the boy asked.

'No,' the old woman said, impatiently.

'You're just a very wrinkly woman then,' the boy concluded. He stepped up to the front door and snapped a cylinder of frosting from its frame. 'And your house is yummy.'

Anger expanded into the old woman's chest, swelling like yeast. She grabbed the boy by his shirt, tumbling him into the house.

'You will no-longer-ever be eating my house,' she insisted.

The girl stepped inside, following her friend as he scrambled to his feet. Both children looked alarmed. The old woman felt pleased. She opened the stove door for fright, for emphasis. Hot air leapt out at the three of them. 'If you come again I will roast you,' she blustered.

No-one knows what happened next. The children insist that they ran away, terrified by the old woman's threat. The police report describes an ill-fated trip, a terrible accident. Of course, no-one thinks

about it much. They know they made the old woman welcome. Many of them remember chatting to her in the supermarket and carrying her shopping. They certainly don't ever wonder whether, having osmosed the prevailing sentiment, the over-wrought children simply pushed the old woman into her stove.

*The End*