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# The Dead of Winter

*The Demons, Witches and  
Ghosts of Christmas*

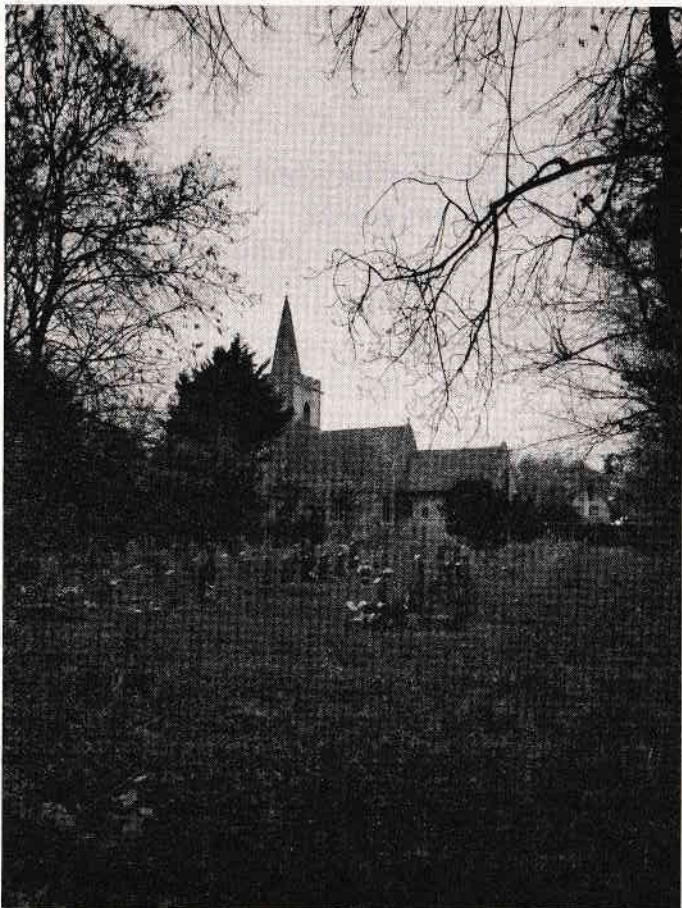


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## INTRODUCTION

## The Year Walk

*24 December*

Before dawn on Christmas Eve, I slip out of the house and into a howling, windswept night, the bells of the Christmas wreath jingling wildly as I pull the front door closed behind me. I haven't spoken to anyone since midnight, I haven't looked into any fires, I haven't eaten anything. I've brought a torch with me (hoping that it doesn't count as a fire on some technicality) but I needn't have worried – behind the scudding clouds there's a bright moon, nearly full, flooding the countryside with a cold, white glow. Even in complete darkness, though, I feel like I'd know my way – I'm at my parents' house for Christmas, and these are paths I've walked since I was a child. Up to the top of the road, turn left. Past the shattered stump of the medieval wayside cross, over the drainage ditch, turn right onto the old farm track. The route is so

familiar, and yet this morning it feels off-kilter, shifting in the ever-changing moonlit shadows and the fierce wind that's wrenching the trees into twisted shapes. I'm walking faster than I need to, tripping in the too-large boots I've borrowed from my mother, trying not to look too hard or linger too long. I know I can't let my unease turn into fear. At best, fear might undo the magic I'm trying to invoke. At worst, it could summon something dangerous.

Once I've hopped the fence into the meadows I stop. I'm supposed to be getting far enough away from the houses that I can't hear a cock crow, and while no one keeps chickens in the village any more, I've read online that the sound carries about a mile.\* This is far enough. I turn, bearing right across the fields into a little patch of woodland until I can see the village church ahead of me, the whitewashed tower a beacon in the moonlight, looming over the trees. My path puts me out at the edge of the graveyard, a dark, glittering Christmas tree just across the road. I perch on the low stone wall that rings the sprawling patch of gravestones and settle down to watch for the ghosts of next year's dead.

It was the Christmas witches who brought me here. While researching child-murdering demons with iron

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\* I'm mainly at my parents' house to fulfil the Christmas obligations of a dutiful daughter, but it did also occur to me that it wouldn't be particularly easy to get a mile away from any houses if I started from my London flat.

body parts\* I ran into Perchta, a monstrous witch with an iron nose, who travels house to house every Christmas leading a cavalcade of the dead. If she finds a child who hasn't done their chores she slits open their belly, pulls out their guts, stuffs them with straw, and then sews up the wound with a ploughshare as a needle and a chain as thread. She is utterly, joyously monstrous, and when I first stumbled across her, that connection with Christmas, a time we're more likely to associate with presents, merriment and feasting than murder and dark magic, felt jarring in the extreme.

But if you look a little closer, you'll find that Christmas teems with monsters. There's Krampus, a hideous, towering demon with enormous horns who beats children with a switch or steals them away, and who rampages through Germany and Austria every 5 December. In Iceland, there's Grýla, an ogress who comes down from the mountains at Christmas and is inclined to eat her victims, popping them into a giant stew while her murderous cat – the Yule Cat – prowls at her side. In France, there's Père Fouettard – Father Whipper – a butcher who had kidnapped, murdered and tried to pickle three young boys, before he was stopped by St Nicholas. As punishment, according to the legend, he was forced to accompany St Nicholas for the rest of eternity, a looming figure lurking behind the saint, whipping children who don't deserve St Nicholas's presents. The supernatural

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\* Don't ever say I don't know how to have a good time.

dangers of Christmas aren't just limited to misbehaving children, either. There are accounts that speak of how witches were thought to be more active in midwinter, of how werewolves were more likely to turn during the Christmas period. It's a time, too, when the dead return, sometimes led by the Christmas witches in a rampaging horde, and sometimes as solemn, sad hauntings. It's a haunting I'm trying to conjure now, as I sit in the dark graveyard, the wind howling around me.

I'm on a Year Walk, or *årsgång*, a tradition that has been attested for centuries in Swedish folklore, which tells how a walk taken before dawn on Christmas Eve, without eating or drinking, without talking to anyone, without looking into a fire, will show the future. More specifically, it should show me shadowy enactments of the burials of anyone who will die in the village this coming year. It might even show me mine – there's an oft-repeated story of a man who stumbled across his own funeral procession on just such a walk as this.

Waiting in the icy darkness, the bare trees swaying violently in the wind, the church dead and empty, it feels almost believable. It's not just the night and my own jumpiness that make the morning feel strange and ominous – it's the very fact that it's Christmas, a time we've set apart, turning it into a strange, sparkling otherworld of gift-bearing visitors flying through the sky, of fairy lights glinting among trees we've dragged inside from some dark, distant forest. If magic were ever real, it would be real now. On this Christmas Eve morning I am on the cusp of the climax, the final day before the more intense

festivities truly begin, festivities that will culminate in the end of the old year and the beginning of the new – and new beginnings always beget omens. On top of that, the winter solstice and the longest night were just two days before: I am buried almost as deeply as I can be in darkness. No matter how much jollity we associate with the season, you can't deny that it's the perfect time for some arcane prophesying as well.\*

And if there's any truth to the stories of the Year Walk, I need to stay alert. The future doesn't always want to be seen, and there are warnings of dangers that lurk on journeys such as these, preserved in multiple accounts held in the Swedish Folklore Archive.† In one version, the Year Walker loses an eye to the ghosts, in others they lose their sanity. Sometimes they simply disappear into the night, never to return. The graves in the cemetery might open, releasing those who died unhappy deaths, or a huge sow, with glowing eyes covering its entire body, might emerge to block the walker's path. Showing fear is one of the ways to summon these monsters – or stop the magic altogether. Laughter will also break the spell, and though someone might be unlikely to burst into giggles

\* In fact, prophesying death over Christmas doesn't only appear in Swedish folklore. There's also a Twelfth Night tradition in Ireland where candles are lit by each member of the household. Whoever's candle burns down first will be the first to die.

† And discussed in the glorious article "He Met His Own Funeral Procession": The Year Walk Ritual in Swedish Folk Tradition' by Tommy Kuusela, for those of us lamenting that we don't read a word of Swedish.

at the sight of an unhappy revenant or a horrifying pig, there is a Year Walk story in which two tiny, farting rats appeared in the path of the walker, causing him to laugh and forgo his chance of seeing the future. No farting rats, walking corpses, or multi-eyed sows appear in front of me this morning, but no ghostly funeral processions cross into the graveyard either.

I'm a long way into my vigil before it occurs to me that there are only a handful of burial plots left in the churchyard. Most people who die in the village will need to be buried in modern cemeteries and crematoriums, so even supposing that the Year Walk magic is working just fine, the odds of encountering a ghostly burial procession were always low. Perhaps I'll have more luck with another method – according to some versions of the folklore, if the walker circles the church three times and looks through the keyhole of the door, they'll see a premonition of a service a year from now. Anyone missing from their pew will be dead before the year is out. I slip down from my perch on the wall and walk round the church, stumbling on the uneven ground, counting the circuits,\* and then I head to the little stone porch. There's a modern mesh door barring the entrance, which I expect to be locked – it normally is when the church

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\* In some versions of the story, circling the church three times will not only bring you luck in the new year but will also remove any werewolf-based curses you happen to be carrying. I don't think I was afflicted when I set out, but on this eerie, ominous night it's nice to know there's one thing less to worry about.

is closed. But to my surprise, when I pull the handle, it swings open. I duck inside, into a deeper darkness that's hidden even from the moonlight, a tinsel star hung from the ceiling swinging in the wind above my head. I give my eyes a moment to adjust to the gloom, and look for a keyhole in the ancient oak door in front of me. There isn't one. After a moment's hesitation, I reach for the latch – if the mesh door was unlocked, the main door might be too. But as I push the latch down, all I can think about is another thread of Year Walk folklore which says that every Christmas Eve, before dawn, the dead themselves hold their own church services, and they don't like it when the living try to attend – or they'll insist that the living stay. If the Year Walk magic can truly be broken by fear, this is the moment it would snap. Loath as I am to admit it, standing in that dark doorway, pushing down on the latch, feeling it give beneath my finger and start to lift, I'm afraid of what I might find waiting for me inside the church.

But the door is locked. After the initial give, the latch refuses to yield any further. I walk back outside, a little relieved, to see that the darkness is thinning, a scorched white line appearing on the horizon. I turn to head back, but take the route directly through the village rather than over the fields, keeping an eye out for any ghostly flames that should be burning where there'll be fires in the coming year. The last serious fire here was decades ago, long before I was born, so perhaps it's not surprising that I don't see any swirling, shadowy smoke hanging over anyone's homes. Year Walks, it turns out, may not be as useful

for predicting the dramas of modern village life as they once were. As I reach the high street, a dog walker waves at me and shouts a Christmas greeting. I feel obliged to yell one back, even if speaking to someone firmly cuts off my chance of witnessing future ghosts.\*

There's no need for me to linger now, and besides, I'm pretty sure there are mince pies for breakfast at home. Days of Christmas cheer await, which in ordinary circumstances should shake off any idea of church services of the dead, or shadowy, ominous funeral processions. But by the time I set out on my Year Walk, I'd already met a whole host of Christmas demons. Because the more I learned of the darkness of Christmas, the more I wanted to experience it myself, to immerse myself in these terrifying traditions that seem, at first glance, to contradict the bright magic we've built around the season. This book begins on the morning of Christmas Eve, and will end on the evening of Christmas Day, but in between it will roam through the whole winter season, from murderous plays enacted in the Cotswolds on Boxing Day, to encounters with the grinning horse-skull Mari Lwyd in Wales in late January; from Krampus runs in Austria in early December and the Nordic Lussinatt festivities on 13 December (when a young woman is crowned with candles as the martyred St Lucy, who is both a beautiful, chaste Christian girl and also a rampaging witch), to the

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\* Sources differ on whether or not being afraid will have any effect on the Year Walk magic, but all are united in the idea that talking shatters it completely.

modern midwinter rituals at Stonehenge that take place on the winter solstice. This is my account of a winter spent with monsters, but it's also an effort to understand their history, where and when they originated, and why they take the forms they do.<sup>†</sup> It is an attempt as well to understand why we are so drawn to horrors at Christmas-time. We may spend midwinter surrounded by warmth, good food, and companionship, but Christmas coincides with the darkest time of the year, and the legends we have repeated and adapted over the centuries remind us that beyond the glow of firelight, the shadows are waiting. Are you sure that the darkness has been kept entirely at bay? And do you think it might be fun to let a little in?

Oddly enough, the best place to start with all this isn't even Christmas. It's a little later in the winter: Carnival.

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\* This history-understanding, incidentally, is why this book isn't a travelogue that works through the Christmas season in date order, starting with Krampus night on 5 December and finished with the Mari Lwyds in mid-January. Very irritatingly of the Christmas monsters, Krampus isn't the best way to begin if you want to peel back the layers and see where the darkness of Christmas originated.