

"Dornička and the St.  
Martin's Day Goose"  
by Helen Oyeyemi  
from the collection  
What Is Not Yours  
Is Not Yours (2016)



*dornička and the st. martin's day goose*

Matko, matičko! řekněte,  
nač s sebou ten nůž béřete?  
"Mother, dear mother, tell me, do—  
why have you brought that knife with you?"

—FROM "THE GOLDEN SPINNING WHEEL,"  
KAREL JAROMÍR ERBEN

Well, Dornička met a wolf on Mount Radhošť.  
Actually let's try to speak of things as they are:  
It was not a wolf she met, but something that had recently  
consumed a wolf and was playing about with the remnants.  
The muzzle, tail, and paws appeared in the wrong order.  
Dornička couldn't see very far ahead of her in the autumn  
dusk, so she smelled it first, an odor that made her think

*gangrene*, though she'd never smelled that. The closest thing she could realistically liken this smell to was sour, overripe fruit. And then she saw a fur that buzzed with flies, pinched her nostrils together and thought: *Ah, why? I don't like this.* She'd gone up the mountain to look at a statue of a hypothetical pagan god; she'd taken a really long look at him and for her he remained hypothetical. But it had been a good walk up a sunlit path encircled by bands of brown and gray; it had been like walking an age in a tree's life, that ring of color in the trunk's cross section. As she walked she'd been thinking about city life, and how glad she was that she didn't live one. According to Dornička, cities are fueled by the listless agony of workers providing services to other workers who barely acknowledge those services. You can't tell Dornička otherwise; she's been to a few cities and she's seen it with her own eyes, so she knows. City people only talk to people they're already acquainted with, so as to avoid strangers speaking to them with annoying over-familiarity or in words that aren't immediately comprehensible. And everybody in the city is just so terribly bored. Show a city dweller wonders and they'll yawn, or take a photo and send it to somebody else with a message that says "Wow." The last time Dornička had been to Prague she'd made some glaring error as she bought a metro ticket—she still didn't know what exactly her error had

been . . . an old-fashioned turn of phrase, perhaps—and her goddaughter Alžběta had clicked her tongue and called her a country mouse. Instead of feeling embarrassed Dornička had felt proud and said: “Come and visit your country mouse at home sometime.” So Alžběta was coming. Her arrival was a week away, and she was bringing her own daughter, Klaudie. Dornička’s anticipation of this visit was such that she’d been having trouble sleeping. Klaudie and Alžběta had visited before, had filled her house with hairpins and tone-deaf duets inspired by whatever was on the radio, and she longed to have them by her again. Dornička liked her work and her friends and the town she lived in. She liked that she made enough of a difference to the education of her former pupils for them to write to her and sometimes even visit her with news from time to time. But she really couldn’t get used to being a widow (she would’ve liked to know if there was anybody who got used to that state of affairs) and didn’t often feel as if she had anything much to look forward to. If it hadn’t been for Alžběta and Klaudie’s forthcoming visit she might have succumbed to the “wolf” at once. But since she had to live for at least another week she pinched her nostrils together and thought: *Ah, why?* Like it or not the “wolf” was standing there in her path so that she couldn’t get by. As for “why,” it must have been due to her red cape. Our Dornička

had decided that once you reach your late fifties you can wear whatever you want and nobody can say anything to you about it. Looks like Mount Radhošť' is different, eh, Dornička?

THE "WOLF" approached, paying no attention to Dornička's repeated requests that it do no such thing. It pushed back the hood of her cape.

"Oh!" said the "wolf," and shuffled back so that it was standing on the side of the path, out of her way.

Somewhat offended, Dornička stared over her shoulder and into the "wolf's" glassy eyes.

"Am I that bad?" she asked.

"Not at all, not at all, no need to take that tone," the "wolf" demurred. "I just thought you were young, that's all."

"Nope, just short," Dornička said, pulling her hood back up.

"Yes, I see that now, so please be on your way."

"But surely you can't be him," Dornička declared, with a cutting glance.

"Him?"

"The Big Bad Wolf, of course."

The "wolf" tugged its whiskers with an air of self-

consciousness. “The truth is, that fellow is modeled on me . . .”

“Wasn’t he killed by the woodchopper?”

“Yes, yes, but go back to the beginning and there he is again, ready for action. This is the beginning again, and I thought you were her. In a way it’s good that you’re not her. The wolf gets to eat a lot before she comes along . . .”

“*She* being . . . ?”

“Never mind, never mind—I’ll just wait for the next one,” the “wolf” muttered. And Dornička wondered what on earth could be inside that rotting skin.

“Good . . . you do that,” Dornička replied, and then, a few steps down the path, thinking of “the next one,” she sighed and returned to the “wolf.” “But what is it you need, exactly? You can’t be hungry; you just ate an entire wolf.”

The “wolf” shrugged its shoulders and said: “You wouldn’t understand.”

The forlornness of its voice prompted Dornička to coax: “Come now, you can tell me.”

“Life,” said the “wolf.” “I need more life . . . do you think it’s easy for the seasons to change here amidst all this stone?”

“I see,” said Dornička. “It must take a lot.”

“I almost have enough, but I just need a crumb more. Something juicy and young.”

*Ah, whatever you are, you really stink.* The “wolf’s” haphazard configuration made her own feel loose; she tapped her thighs and forearms. They hadn’t changed. She’d scowled whenever her Tadeáš had slapped her bum and chuckled, “Built to last,” but for now that was a blessing. A group of hikers strolled by; as they realized they were witnessing the encounter of age-old adversaries they booed the “wolf” and urged Dornička on toward her fated triumph, and would have taken photos if it weren’t for the fact that Dornička refused to drop the hood and reveal her side profile. The “wolf” was happy to pose . . .

“What an irregular costume . . . interesting!” The hikers moved on, but one of their party, a rosy-cheeked girl who looked to be sixteen or so, knelt on the ground to retie her shoelaces. Dornička watched the “wolf” stir.

“What can I do to help you change the season here?” she asked, snapping her fingers in front of the “wolf’s” snout.

A tongue darted out across a flaccid muzzle. “Send me something juicy and young.”

“Then I will,” Dornička promised. “But you can’t go after anyone. Just be patient and I’ll send you something nice. OK?”

“OK . . .” said the “wolf.” “But just to be sure . . .”

It raised its paw and dealt her a staggering blow to the

hip; by rights this should have shattered the bone but it didn't. It just hurt an awful lot. "That should do it . . ."

The "wolf" padded up the mountainside and folded its carcass into a rocky crevice, awaiting the arrival of the morsel Dornička had agreed to send.

Dornička limped home, and from there to the emergency room of the local hospital, where she was assured that no part of her body had been sprained or broken. But a bruise grew over her left hipbone; it grew three-dimensional, pushing its way out of her frame like a king-sized wart. The bruise wasn't colored like a bruise either—it was a florid pink, like a knob of cured ham. At times she felt it contract and expand as if it were suckling at her hip joint. The sight and feel of that made her nauseous, but a doctor scanned and prodded both Dornička and her lump and said that Dornička was in fine fettle and the lump would fall off on its own. When Dornička was fully clothed it looked as if she was pregnant or experiencing extreme and left hip-specific weight gain. People remarked upon it, so the day before Alžběta and Klaudie arrived, Dornička took a carving knife, put her left foot on the edge of the bathtub, and cut the ham-like knob off. As she'd suspected the severance was painless and actually relieved the tension she'd been feeling, as if she was a patient in an era in which bloodletting was still believed to be a procedure that

brought balance to the body's humors. She treated the wound, wrapped gauze bandages around it, washed and dried the heavy, oval-shaped lump of flesh. Was it fat, muscle, a mix of both? She pushed her finger into the center of the oval. Soft, but elasticity was minimal. Like lukewarm porridge. Lukewarm . . . *Ah, this thing had better not be alive.* Of course it wasn't, of course it wasn't. She thought about weighing it and decided not to. She also thought about taking the severed lump to the "wolf" but that would be a wasted journey, since this flesh didn't meet the "wolf's" requirements. She buried it in the garden beneath an ash tree. Then she put her considerable talent for making nice things to eat to Alžběta and Klaudie's service, simmering and baking and braising through the night.

KLAUDIE had nineteen years behind her and who knew how many ahead; her eyes sparkled and did not see. Sometimes she used a cane, sometimes not, depending on her own confidence and the pace of the crowd around her. In Ostrava she didn't use her cane at all. That autumn she went around Dornička's pantry lifting lids and opening cupboard doors: "What is that delicious smell? I want a slice right now!" Alžběta and Dornička served up portions of everything that was available, tasting as they went along,



but Klaudie sniffed each plate and dismissed its contents. Then she went and stood under Dornička's ash tree and drew such deep and voluptuous breaths that Dornička began to have the kind of misgivings one doesn't put into words.

"Come, Klaudie," she called. "I need your help with something."

The project Dornička invented wasn't especially time-consuming, but it was better than nothing. Klaudie took up a power drill and Dornička a handsaw and ruler and they made a small, simple but sturdy wooden chest, and when they had finished Alžběta fetched out her own bag of tools and fitted the wooden chest with a lock—"Free of charge, free of charge, and I hope it holds your treasures for you for years to come, dear Dornička," she said, giving her godmother a big kiss before turning in for the night. Even though the locked chest was empty Dornička slept with her fingers wrapped around the key that fit its lock; that hand made a fist over her stomach.

DORNIČKA was one of twelve caterers who made meals for the town's coal miners. Alžběta and Klaudie helped her deliver her carloads of appetizing nutrition; they were well-beloved at the mine and there was much laughter and

chatter as they stacked lunchboxes on the break room counter for later. Several fathers had Klaudie in mind for a daughter-in-law and sang their sons' praises, but most of the others warned her against chaining herself to a local: "Travel the world if you can, Klaudie—go over and under and in between, and if there happens to be a man or three on the way, that's well and good, but afterward just leave him where you found him!"

Klaudie listened to both sides; these were people who felt the movement of the earth far better than she, and when she visited Dornička she thought of them often as they moved miles beneath her feet. Tremors that merely rumbled through her soles broke the miners' bodies. They knew risk, and when they encouraged her in one direction or another they had already looked ahead and taken many of her possible losses into account. There was one among them who kept his mouth shut around her, as he was a coarse young man who didn't want to say the wrong thing. When Klaudie spoke to him he answered "Eh," and "Mmm," with unmistakable nervousness, and she liked him the best. Dornička favored candlelight over electric light, and as Klaudie went about Dornička's living room lighting candles in the evening the wavering passage of light across her eyelids felt just like the silence of that boy at the coal mine. Dornička invited the boy to dinner

but the invitation agitated him and he refused it. Alžběta, whose snobbery was actually outrageous, said that the boy knew some things just aren't meant to be.

“. . . OR these things just happen in their own time,” Dornička told her, partly to annoy her and partly because it was true.

ALL SOULS' DAY came and the three women went to the churchyard where so many who shared their family names were buried. They tidied the autumn leaves into garland-like arrangements around the graves, had friendly little chats with each family member, focusing on each one's known areas of interest, and all in all it was a comfortable afternoon. There was a little sadness, but no feelings of desolation on either side, as far as the women could tell, anyway. In a private moment with Tadeáš, Dornička told him about the “wolf” that had punched her and the lump that had grown and been buried, and she told him about Klauďie going on and on about a delicious smell and then suddenly shutting up about the smell, and she told him she'd found telltale signs of interrupted digging beneath her ash tree.

Tadeáš's disapproval came through to her quite clearly: *You shouldn't have promised that creature anything.*

But she couldn't regret her promise when it had been a choice between that or the "wolf" waiting for the next one.

*But how are you going to keep this promise, my Dornička?*

*Don't know, don't know . . .*

Tadeáš relented, and it came to her that the very least she could do was dig the lump up herself and put the new wooden chest to use. That night Alžběta took Klaudie to visit old school friends of hers and Dornička did her digging and held the lump up to her face, looking for nibble marks or other indicators of consumption. A dead earthworm had filled the hole she'd poked into the lump, but apart from that the meat was still fresh and whole. In fact it was pinker than before. Klaudie had described the smell as that of yeast and honey, like some sort of bun, so Dornička did her best to think of it as a bun, locked it up in the chest and put the locked chest on the top shelf of the wardrobe beside the hat box that contained her wedding hat. In the days that followed she would often find Klaudie in her bedroom "borrowing" spritzes of perfume and the like. A couple of times she even caught Klaudie trying on her red cape; each time brought Dornička closer to a heart attack than she'd ever been before. But the key never left her person, so all she needed was a chance to build a little bonfire and put the lump out of reach for good.

---

THAT YEAR it was Klaudie who chose the St. Martin's Day goose. The three women went to market and Klaudie asked Pankrác the goose farmer which of his flock was the greediest—"We want one that'll eat from morning 'til night . . ." All Pankrác's customers wanted the same characteristics in their St. Martin's Day goose, but Pankrác had his reasons for wishing to be in Dornička's good graces, so when her goddaughter's daughter asked which goose was the greediest he was honest and handed over the goose in question. The goose allowed Klaudie to hand-feed her some scraps of lettuce and a few pieces of apple, but seemed baffled by this turn of events. She honked a few times, and Alžběta interpreted: "Me? Me . . . ? Surely there must be some mistake . . ."

"Thanks, Pankrác . . . I'll save you the neck . . ."

Dornička spread newspaper all along the backseat of her car and placed the caged goose on top of the newspaper. The goose honked all the way home; they'd got a noisy one, but Dornička didn't mind. When Klaudie said she felt sorry for the goose and wished they'd just gone to a supermarket and picked a packaged one, Dornička rolled her eyes. "This city child of yours," she said to Alžběta, and to

Klaudie: “You won’t be saying that once you’ve tasted its liver.”

The goose quieted down a bit once she’d been installed in Dornička’s back garden. She would only eat from Klaudie’s hand, so it became Klaudie’s job to feed her. It’s well-known that geese don’t like people, so the companionship that arose between Klaudie and the goose was something of an oddity. Klaudie spoke to the goose as she pecked at her feed, and stroked the goose’s feathers so that they were sleek. Dornička harbored a mistrust of the goose, since she pecked hard at the ground in a particular patch of the garden—the patch where Dornička’s infernal lump had been buried. No wonder Klaudie and the goose got along; maybe they had long chats about all the things they could smell. The goose was extraordinarily greedy too, Dornička’s greediest yet: “Eating us out of house and home,” Dornička grumbled when Klaudie knocked on the kitchen door to ask if there were any more scraps.

Alžběta was more concerned about Klaudie’s fondness for the goose. “She might not let us kill it,” she said. “And you know I like my goose meat, Dornička!”

“It’s all right, it’s all right,” Dornička said. “Trust me, that goose’s days are numbered.”

She caught Klaudie in her bedroom again and almost fought with her.

“For the last time, Klaudie, what are you doing in here?”

Klaudie fluttered her eyelashes and murmured something about scraps. *Any scraps for the goose, Dornička . . . ?*

That gave Dornička an idea.

Again, let's not dress anything up in finery, let's speak of things as they are: While Klaudie and Alžběta were sleeping, Dornička fed her lump to the goose. The flesh was gobbled up without hesitation and then the goose began to run around the garden in circles, around and around. This was dizzying to watch, so Dornička didn't watch. She dropped the key inside the empty chest and poured herself a celebratory shot of *slivovice*. Good riddance to bad rubbish.

THE NEXT DAY Klaudie was bold enough to bring the empty chest to Dornička and ask what had been in it.

“Kids don't need to know. Please feed the goose again, Klaudie.”

But Klaudie didn't want to. She said the goose had changed. “She doesn't honk at all anymore, and she seems aware,” she said.

“Aware?”

Dornička went to see for herself; she took a bucket of waterfowl feed out to the back garden.

The goose appeared to have almost doubled in size overnight.

Her eyes were bigger too.

She looked at Dornička as if she was about to call her by name.

Dornička threw the bucket on the ground and walked back into the house very quickly.

“See what I mean?” Klaudie said.

IT WAS THE EVE of St. Martin’s Day, November 10th. The first snow of the winter was close by. Dornička abandoned reason for a few moments, just the amount of time required to switch on her laptop and order another red cape. Child-sized this time. Express delivery. When it arrived she left it in the back garden with the waterfowl feed and said prayerfully: “What will be will be.”

SHE LEFT THE BACK door open that night, and when the St. Martin’s Day goose came up the stairs and into her bedroom, she wasn’t taken by surprise, not even when she saw that the goose was wearing the red cape and had Dornička’s car keys in her beak.

“Thank you, goose,” she said. “I appreciate you.”



She drove the goose to the foot of Mount Radhošť' and watched her waddle away up the mountain path, a bead of scarlet ascending into ash.

*Thank you, goose. I appreciate you.*

Alžběta the goose-meat lover didn't even complain that much in the morning. She just glared at Klaudie and told her to forget about choosing the Christmas carp.