

Hansel

A Prose Poem by Marvyne Jenoff

The witch lived at the edge of the multi-coloured city, where things happened. She lived in the kind of building where she wasn't allowed to display anything personal or political on the outside. So, when she felt lonely, she wore her gingerbread on her sleeve, conjured up some candy-coloured tickets, and went into the city by train, like everyone else.

In the city there was a boy, the son of poor but intelligent parents. He had and had not wanted to leave home. Lost in his dilemma, he stopped at a traffic light, and found himself eating gingerbread. He asked whether she also made shortbread and macaroons and jelly beans and licorice sticks. How wonderful to be able to make all those things! He admired the witch herself, and asked wistfully where she lived.

The witch glowed in the boy's appreciation and felt lonelier than ever. Aware of how quickly her future was approaching, she came up with an idea. First she ascertained that the boy had no sister who might interfere. Then she proposed a bargain. Come home with me, she said. I will teach you all I know if you will stay with me when I'm dying.

And so the boy lived in the apartment with the witch, and there were always wonderful emanations from the oven. As long as he learned well and wanted to be like her, the witch was happy. She soon grew to love the boy. In love she became less of a witch and was glad of the change. She was so happy that she forgot how to conjure up train

tickets. She no longer bothered to bake. And when the boy took over her kitchen she was proud of him.

The boy was happy in his kitchen. He willingly shaped his hands to her eccentric utensils. He learned to bend gracefully to reach the low oven. But when he found himself making up recipes of his own, when he found that it was easier to do so than to follow the witch's old recipes, her utensils no longer fit his hands and broke in use. The boy began to feel caged in. And when he suspected that she was praising all his concoctions indiscriminately he felt he was being fattened up for some sinister purpose. One day, his head full of recipes, no thought of the train, he walked to the city.

She is very old now. Most days she is content to watch television with the neighbours, nibble chocolate from the convenience store, and dream about her gingerbread man, for by now he is surely a man. She likes to imagine him striding through the city, making things happen. When she thinks of dying she remembers their bargain, and she is enough of a non-witch to admit it was probably unfair, the boy had been too young at the time to understand, poor thing. She often thinks of dying. She would like him to visit just once, though she doesn't suppose he will.

But some days she wakes up a witch again. Enough of a witch to say, a bargain is a bargain. She walks and plots, morning, noon and evening, refusing to die.