

A Thief in the Night

Jayge Carr

Jayge Carr, with a degree in physics, writes chiefly in the area of science fiction. Leviathan's Deep from Doubleday was the first of several novels. She occasionally writes fantasy as well, as the present story shows. "A Thief in the Night" is from the fantasy issue of Canada's Room of One's Own, a leading feminist little magazine. That issue was guest-edited by the late Susan Wood, a Hugo Award winner for her fan writing. Many literary journals, including those with special feminist focus, have had f/sf issues and offer a sprinkling of supernatural fiction in regular issues.

Jayge Carr has contributed to small fantasy and horror magazines as well, including Bloodrake, Fantasy Book, and Whispers.

The three sisters had lived together a long time, and each worked at her appointed task, in companionable silence. Their house curled, long and low, amid majestic trees. Built of native wood and rock, it seemed not so much to blend with its surroundings as to have grown there, a natural part of the environment.

One long wall of the comfortable workroom was glass, open now to a subtly scented informal garden, shimmering in the moonlight. Within, more light was provided by a number of oil lamps and a cheerful, crackling fire on the hearth. Before the fire, a marmalade tom sprawled bonelessly on a bright rag rug. From time to time he stretched and lazily washed a paw, or flopped over to a more comfortable position. The only sounds in the room were the low night-songs from the garden, the snapping of the fire, the whirr of the eldest sister's spinning wheel, the click of shuttle and heddle from the second sister's loom, and the rustle of clothing as the youngest sister busied herself at small quiet tasks, winding yarn, laying out threads for the pattern online loom, or snipping a loose thread with her shining silver shears.

The thief eased himself through the unlocked window and gazed around the moonlit, lovingly furnished bedroom with avid glee. Jeez, whatta piece a' cake! An ol' stone fence a kid could hop over, and the house itself isolated by its huge estate. What'd three nutty ol' women want with all this nature stuff -- dingbats, the three of 'em, no TV antennas, no wires, even. But ol' biddies like these oughtta have plenty stashed away somewhere. Money. Jewelry. Who-knew-what.

He jerked the Tree-of-Life patterned quilt from the bed, proved its softness, slashing it here and there with a careless disregard of its exquisitely tiny hand-stitching, until he was sure it concealed no goodies.

Snarling, he flung the ruined remnants in a corner.

The pillow yielded only feathers; he had to suppress a fit of

coughing.

He lifted the mattress, glared at the rope web underneath, slapped it back down, and, like a pathologist making his first incision, drew the long knife down it from top to bottom.

Jeez, nutty ol' biddies, sleepin' on dried grass^

A pungent spicy smell filled the room, softened by rosemary, sweetened by mint. His hands searched and thrust through the rustling, scratchy dryness.

Jeez, it couldn't be real grass, could it?

He crumbled a bit of it between his fingers, smelt deeply.

Na! Jist plain ol' grass! Those rotten ol' --

With mounting fury and frustration, he tackled the crowded but neat table and dresser tops, the drawers, the closets, all filled with the pretty but worthless mementos sentimental old women are likely to save.

Hadda be lotsa loot 'round here someplace! All tha stories he'd heard 'bout them three ol' witches --

If there wasn't nothin' in the bedrooms, maybe he'd see what he could squeeze outta the ol' bats themselves, Handle'm easy with only die knife. But -- he hated to leave witnesses -- have the pigs on his trail -- worse if he murdered --

He was young, cruelly handsome as a new-risen god, born in poverty, raised in ignorance, thrust out too soon into an indifferent world. But he was smart, yes, he was, he congratulated himself. Who else would have listened to all those stories, thrown out the obvious fairy tales, and spotted the golden opportunity? The rich, eccentric old ladies, not even a phone to call for help.

Jeez, why worry 'bout the pigs? If anything -- happened -- to those three, it'd be days, weeks before the pigs even realized -- or maybe a fire -- burn all that evidence -- laugh at that, stupid pigs -- yeah, laugh --

Yeah, burn -- everything --

Laugh --

The sisters worked on unknowing, their silver hair braided in regal coronets, their skilled fingers flashing almost faster than mere eye could follow.

"Mrrrrrrrow!" The cat sat up, gave warning.

"Why, look at Charon," said the youngest, short and plumpish, everyone's ideal grandmother, her fingers never pausing in winding a great ball of yarn.

"What can be amiss?" wondered the eldest, tiny yet imperial.

"I think -- do you hear something, in the bedrooms?" asked the middle sister, tall and elegant, long, slender fingers busy at her loom.

"Perhaps," the youngest laid aside her ball of yarn and cocked her head. She rose, and moved to stand behind the loom.

"There's a flaw in your pattern, sister." Her finger tapped the cloth, just beneath the shuttle, gently.

"You're right, sister. A grievous flaw. Shall I reweave?"

The door to the bedroom hall crashed open, the thief, knife in hand, stalked into the room. "All right, ladies," he growled.

"Nobody makes no trouble, nobody gets hurt." His eyes glinted

brighter than jewels on necks, wrists, and ears. "We'll start with you." His free hand reached toward the eldest, seated at her wheel.

"You haven't time, sister," said the youngest. "I'll just snip it off." Her silver shears flashed in the firelight as she carefully snipped one thread in the intricate pattern.

Lightning flashed, too, out of the clear night sky. Its unbearable brightness was the last thing the thief ever saw.

"You'll have to reweave a bit, anyway, I fear," said the youngest.

"My fault, my fault entirely, sisters," said the weaver. "I don't know how I could have been so careless. After so many years, too."

The marmalade cat paced around the rug three times, and then settled back.

"My, Charon seems active tonight," said the eldest.

"As long as I was trimming loose ends," the youngest murmured.

"This room must be properly cleansed," the eldest said, her fingers never faltering.

"One of us can fetch the flamens, in the morning," said the weaver.

"They call them policemen here, dearest," said the youngest.

"Whatever."

"Our bedrooms, too," the eldest frowned.

"Oh, sister," the youngest pleaded, "the night is so warm -- "

"Like the old country," added the weaver.

"And the moon so full -- "

The eldest tried to be stern, and then smiled. "Just this once, sisters. Mind you now, just this once."

"Thank you, sister." The youngest's round cheeks grew red with joy.

"Thank you, sister," the weaver said, and then added, sighing, "my poor pattern. So careless of me." Another sigh. "I must be getting old."

"All of us, dearest sister." The eldest, smiling, turned back to her work.

To his dying day, the police chief could never understand how a man could be electrocuted in a house a mile from the nearest wires, on a clear, cloudless night. Well, he shrugged to himself, small loss. Saves us the cost of a trial. Besides, his wife liked the sweet, harmless old ladies, who were always ready to contribute handcrafts for bazaars and charities. He filed the case away.

The sisters smiled quietly, and took up again the interrupted threads of their lives. They had, after all, lived together a very long time.