

Even if the witch has never killed or done evil to man, or beast, or fruits,
and even if he has always cured bewitched people, or driven away
tempests, it is because he has renounced God and treated with Satan that
he deserves to be burned alive.

- Jean Bodin, De la démonomanie des sorciers

A page from the American Coven's Book of Memory...

Giselle Aragon, Spain, 1521, burned

Jeanne Levine, France, 1598, burned

Anne Winterbourne, England, 1621, hanged

Barbara Beck, Germany, 1628, beheaded

Isobel Douglas, Scotland, 1643, burned

For every name there are two stories: that of life and that of death. Alive, they shared only one trait, that they were witches. In death, this was the only trait that mattered. Every woman on this list was tried and executed as a witch. Most, like Isobel Douglas, practiced their gifts openly, complacent in the belief that no one could fault them if they did only good. Like Isobel, they were wrong.

Shall I tell you about Isobel? Let's make her more than a name on a list. She deserves that. They all do, but we have time only for one. I could tell you about her life, and what she did with it, who she loved and who she hated. But I won't. I'll tell you the second story, the one that earned her a place in the Book of Memory. The story of her death.

Scotland 1643

Icy water hits Isobel's face. She sputters and try to leap up, but her body convulses and flops like a half-dead fish on land. Yesterday, after a week of torture, the court tried to wrench a confession from her by hoisting her, arms first, to the rafters, then dropping her again and again, never letting her feet touch down. Today, she can't move.

"Wake up, witch," the guard says.

He dumps the rest of the bucket onto Isobel's head. As she gasps through the freezing shower, Reverend Kincaid moves from behind the guard and take his place at her bedside, to witness her confession, should she care to give it. She doesn't.

There's no mention of breakfast. Isobel hasn't eaten in four days. It is God's will--and the court's decree--that she should fast, to clear her mind and prepare her for confession. Even if they did bring food, she'd refuse it. Every morsel she eats is charged to her account, along with the cost of the guards and her cell and the expenses of the witch-hunter from Glasgow. Her estate will be sold to pay this account, leaving her daughter a pauper. Should her meager belongings fall short, her daughter will owe the remainder, as will her children after her, until it is paid. Even if Isobel doesn't eat today, there is one more expense to be added to her account. The cost of her burning. Fourteen loads of peat, plus coal and wood.

Kincaid looks down at Isobel. “I must ask again. Do ye confess?”

She says nothing.

The guard dumps her limp body into a cart stinking of horseshit and wheels her from the jail, striking each uneven cobblestone on the way. Isobel doesn't care. They have done their worst and the end is coming. All she must do now is resist any temptation to confess.

Confession would not set her free, it would only make her death more merciful. The price of that mercy would be her daughter's life. It is commonly believed that the daughter of a confessed witch must herself be a witch, having learned sorcery at the family hearth along with her sewing and spinning lessons.

The guard wheels Isobel into the courtyard. From beyond the high wooden gate comes the sound of children playing. Isobel closes her eyes and smiles at the sound. Then the girl calls, ‘when will it happen, mama? when will they burn the witch?’ and Isobel hears the cries of vendors hawking their wares, the excited buzz of speculation, the jostling and shouts of people—neighbors—vying for the best seat to witness her death.

“Pay heed, witch,” the guard says. They have long since stopped using her name. “The good reverend will give you one final chance.”

Kincaid steps before her, stops and turns his head, drawing her attention to his side. Isobel obeys. Beside Kincaid, another guard appears. He pulls a black wire through his fingers, then, meeting her gaze, snaps it tight.

“Ye know the custom, witch?” Kincaid asks.

Isobel says nothing.

“As sanctioned by King James VI we give you one final chance to avoid the agony of death by burning. Recant and your death shall be quick and merciful, as our Lord decrees. Only your earthly remains shall be consigned to the fire. Refuse and ye shall burn now and for all time.”

She says nothing.

“Once more I will ask, as mercy decrees. Do ye recant?”

“I—” Her voice croaks and breaks. She forces herself to swallow, sending shafts of pain through her skull. “I have done no wrong.”

The second guard steps forward, the garrote stretched between his hands. His hands move toward her throat. Calling on her last reserve of strength, Isobel flings herself back.

“No!” she croaks. “I do not conf—”

The wire cinches around her throat, cutting off her words. Isobel bucks and convulses against it, her useless arms flopping and waving. The wire cuts through her skin. Pain explodes behind her eyes. She can’t breathe. She fights, writhing and mewling as the wire constricts and her eyes bulge and her blood roars in her ears. Then her body goes limp.

Isobel awakes screaming, smelling smoke and feeling flames lick at her bare legs, igniting her tattered dress. In that first moment of consciousness, she thinks it’s a dream, wondering if we dream when we’re dead and that’s what she doing, awaking in the next life and dreaming she’s been thrown into the fire after all. Then she opens her eyes. Faces of strangers and faces of neighbors are all ringed about her, their eyes glowing with reflected flames. A great cheer goes up.

“She wakes! Look! She’s awake!”

Because she did not recant, they did not strangle her to death, only to unconsciousness, so she would give no fight while they prepared her for burning. So she would truly wake in hell.

Again, she fights. The agony is unbearable and there, only yards away, lies safety. In her first flush of struggle, Isobel realizes the executioner hasn't tightened her bonds, perhaps assuming she has no strength to battle. As she wriggles and twists, the crowd lets out a joyous cry, cheering her on. When the ropes fall from her wrists and waist, no guard leaps to restrain her. No one orders her to stop. Voices urge her on, to keep fighting. Ignoring the flames and the pain and the unspeakable smell, she perseveres until she is free. With one tremendous heave, Isobel throws herself from the flames.

Her strength gives out then and she pitches forward to the grass. A man lunges from the crowd. Then another. Together they use their hats to beat the flames from her dress. Strong hands reach down and lift her from the ground. She whispers her gratitude, voice shaking so badly she can scarcely form words. The two men hoist her up. Then they throw her back into the fire.

Twice more Isobel struggles free and twice more onlookers extinguish the flames on her dress so they would not burn their hands throwing her back in. Soon she begins to burn. The fat beneath her skin catches fire, entombing her in a hell beyond imagining. She screams with newfound strength, a horrible, endless, inhuman keening.. Her dress has charred and fallen free and her naked flesh burns and she screams like a dying rabbit. Yet still her neighbors look on.

They must wait at least another twenty minutes. It takes that long for the fire to burn through to any vital organ. Beside the pyre, the executioner tends the flames, making sure they don't produce enough smoke to choke her and end Isobel's suffering prematurely. Eventually, her arms and legs contract, pulling into her body and soon all that remains is a blackened,

smoldering heap. The executioner steps forward and prods it with a stick. Sometimes, miraculously, there is still life in that charred shell and the fire must be re-lit. Not today, though. It's over. The witch is dead.

The list goes on . . .

Elizabeth Alden, England, 1645, died of plague while in jail

Lucia Baroni, Italy, 1647, beheaded and burned

Katharina Leifsson, Iceland, 1681, burned

Emily Winterbourne, America, 1692, hanged

Jelena Cos, Croatia, 1703, burned

In continental Europe the witch hunts took place under the auspices of the Inquisition, which targeted heresy. Pope Innocent VIII's bull of 1484 began the Inquisition's focus on witches by condemning them as heretical sorcerers. Two years later, the definitive witch hunter's manual, The Malleus Maleficarum, was published. This book irrevocably forged the link between women and witchcraft, declaring that men were immune from Satan's temptations because Jesus was a man. In 1572 the death penalty was enacted for all practitioners of witchcraft. It would be another hundred years before Europe saw its last official witch trial.

In Britain, witchcraft wasn't seen as religious heresy. Instead, because witches could harm the person or property of others, their persecution was seen as a civil matter. In 1542, Henry VIII passed the first Witchcraft Act. It was repealed by Edward VI in 1547. Elizabeth I would

resurrect it with the second Witchcraft Act in 1563, now making witchcraft a capital offense if its practice resulted in the death of another. In 1604, under James I of England--formerly James VI of Scotland--this Act was also repealed, only to be replaced with a harsher one. All incidences of witchcraft were now punishable by death. Again, over a hundred years would pass before the last English witch trial in 1711.

Despite the notoriety of the Salem trials, witch hunting in America never gained the popularity it had in the Old World. In fact, the Salem trials, in which 141 people were arrested and 20 executed, sparked such outrage and disgust that the American witch craze essentially started and ended in Salem. More people were tried and executed in Salem than the rest of America combined.

While some have placed the death toll of the witch-hunts in the millions, more realistic estimates conjecture that 30,000 to 100,000 people died, in addition to those who were imprisoned, tortured, pilloried, banished and/or stripped of their property. The Covens estimate that several hundred true witches died, a number that sounds insignificant until you realize that it represents over one quarter of the witch race. The Book of Memory lists only those whose ancestors later formed the American Coven. Today, less than one-fifth of those names can still be found in the ranks of the Coven. Fear has stripped the Coven of its power, its vitality. A groundless fear? A fear out of time? Out of place in today's world? Perhaps. But the lesson has been learned, and learned well.

Never trust. Never reveal. Never forget.