

## Black Peter

By Gwenyth Love

The sound of many hooves clicking against the cobblestone echoed down the dark alleyway. A wrinkled old man huddled in a corner, layers of clothing and a small garbage fire protecting him from the angry elements. He turned curiously toward the sound and recoiled in fear as the procession passed.

Two wretched looking creatures, skin and hair hanging loosely from their skeletons, eyes red and empty, horns twisted awkwardly along both sides of their ram-like heads, dragged a decaying wooden cart behind them. Hundreds of pieces of coal threatened to overflow the ancient wagon, and vicious beady-eyed rats scurried atop the heap. Several children wandered aimlessly behind the cart, their skin as pale as the cold winter's moon, their bodies rail-like.

The vagrant shook his head, refusing to believe what his eyes had shown him. He shifted back to his meagre flame as a large shadow floated just inside his vision. He snapped his attention back to the cortege, adrenaline coursing through every vein.

The form was both unusually tall, and thin. His cloak billowed out behind him as he crept forward, white clawed feet poking out beneath long black pants. A worn oversized leather journal was tucked

protectively under one arm.

The man gasped his last breath as the dark figure stopped to stare at him.

"Black Peter!"

The figure continued on its way behind his children. The old man remained crouched by the can that had only moments before contained fire, his eyes forever frozen open.

#

Marita gently stroked her son's silky black hair, his head cradled safely against her lap. Her eyes followed the line of Mattias' sleeping form down to the fireplace hearth. A small pair of wooden clogs rested there, a piece of crumpled paper jutted out from one of them.

Marita carefully shifted the boy's head from her lap, onto a nearby cushion, as she slid out from under him, cautious not to wake him. She rose slowly and approached the hearth's edge. Marita stared at the paper for several seconds before her curiosity peaked. She leaned over and plucked the paper from its niche.

The weight of the paper surprised her. She brought the bundle up to her face, examining it for hidden treasures. She caught a glimpse of twine twisted in a sloppy attempt at a knot at the top of the package, obviously trapping something inside.

Marita tugged at the string, pulling at the complicated bindings with her teeth until it began to unravel. The edges of the paper, free of their fastenings, flowered open like the angry petals of a

Venus-flytrap unwilling to give up its prey. A small black object lay nestled inside. Marita lifted it from the paper and rolled it casually in her hand, watching the flames dance and leap in the fireplace like little demons frolicking in Hell.

Abruptly she dropped the object, realizing what she had been fondling. Tearing her eyes away from the fire that had awakened her suppressed memories, she turned to glare at the offending piece of rock, tears slipping from the corners of her eyes. She nudged the black omen with the tip of her slipper and sighed heavily as she collapsed into a dishevelled heap on the floor.

The miniature boulder that she stared at now was the same lump of coal Black Peter had left for Mattias last year. She was sure of it. The Fates had not been kind to her or her son that year. Her husband, Jonas, had died of cancer in early spring, leaving her to raise their eight year old son alone. Mattias had started acting out almost immediately.

She remembered the first time the school had phoned her regarding Mattias. It was only a few weeks after she buried her husband. Mattias' class had a career day presentation hosted by the children's parents. Mattias had no one to speak for him, his father was gone, and lowly housewives were of no matter. Mattias had been extremely upset at the thought of not participating, and had refused to go. Marita would hear none of it. She had escorted him right into his classroom. Perhaps she should have been more lenient. Had everything that had occurred since that day been her fault? Had she

been her son's undoing?

Mattias had convinced several of the boys from his class to meet him behind the school during lunch break. They did this often, meeting to joke about marrying their teacher, Miss de Witte. This time was to be very different.

As the boys approached Mattias, he reached behind his back for the stones he had gathered there. He flung the stones at the boys continuously, only stopping when the wild howls of the injured children caused the teachers to run to their aid. They shielded the boys with their own bodies as they approached Mattias, snatching him up off the ground to drag him to the principal's office.

Mattias' antics had only escalated since then. Vandalized property, stolen objects and money, even a dead stray cat. Nothing could make him stop, not even Black Peter's coal.

Last year Mattias had awakened and rushed to his clogs. Finding the lump of coal had infuriated him. He had hurled it across the room, smashing into the Christmas tree, destroying several glass ornaments. Marita told Mattias the tale of Black Peter, but he would not listen. He refused to believe in such tales, obviously made up by parents to force good behaviour on their children. He had stormed off to his room, pausing only to comment that if the stories were true, Johannus Bakker, the local bully, would have met his demise long before now.

Mattias stirred on the couch and Marita wept softly. How could she continue after losing both her husband and her son? She crawled over

to the sleeping child and wrapped her arms tightly around him, nuzzling her face into his neck. Her tears streamed down her face and trickled onto Mattias' throat.

The boy opened his eyes and glared at his mother.

"What's wrong with you?" he snarled.

She paused momentarily; perhaps Black Peter was doing the world a justice. She shook her head and reached up to wipe her tears away.

"Nothing my love, go back to sleep."

Mattias' face softened, his eyes closing as he began to drift off again.

"Good night ma-ma."

"Good-bye my love."

Marita turned toward her bedroom.

#

Black Peter stood outside the Jansen's small brick home. The pale faced children gathered around him as he opened his treasured book. A long pointed finger scraped down the page, resting on the second to last entry, Mattias Jansen. Peter snapped the book shut and tucked it inside a burlap sack in the back of his cart.

The children began to shriek wildly as he scrambled up the side of the wall. Reaching the roof he slithered toward the narrow chimney. He hopped up onto the edge and began to descend, toenails and fingernails gripping the crevices between the bricks as he lowered himself to the hearth.

The fire extinguished itself as his icy toes touched the surface.

He bent over and crept out of the fireplace. He spotted the boy sleeping soundlessly on the couch and began his approach. His second step brushed something aside. He paused to glance at what dared to distract him from his duties.

A crumpled piece of paper lay abandoned on the hearth's edge, a piece of coal, his piece of coal, lay nearby. He scooped up the paper and opened it to see why it had been cast aside. He snickered at what was written inside.

"Take it back and give me something good this time."

Black Peter smirked and tossed the paper into the empty fireplace, resuming his advance on the boy.

"You will make a fine child, won't you?" he whispered quietly, leaning toward the boy's ear. He dipped in closer, breathing across Mattias' neck. His tongue slipped out and trailed along the boy's throat, tasting his mother's salty tears spilt earlier. "You will be missed by her, but you belong to me now."

Long pointed fangs emerged from behind his cruel lips. Peter sank to finish his deed. Mattias' warm blood spurted into his mouth.

The boy didn't flinch; he ensured there was no pain.

Black Peter retracted his fangs and drew his tongue over his lips, ensuring no droplets were wasted. He gathered up Mattias' still form, tossed it over his shoulder, and proceeded back up the chimney.

Flames burst in the hearth beneath them, consuming the crumpled paper and the piece of coal.

Black Peter stood before another home. He reached into his cart and withdrew his journal from the sack and opened it. He read the final name to himself before taking a piece of coal from the wagon, passing it to the child nearest him.

Mattias stared up at him, his pale face eager for acceptance.

"Go now and deliver this gift." Peter demanded.

Mattias stared at the piece of coal a moment longer before looking back at the house of Johannus Bakker. An evil grin slowly spread across his pale face.

END