

A Visit to Mother Winter

with permission from
[Starhawk](#)

Circle round, and I'll tell you a story for a long winter's night...

Once there were two sisters - we'll call them Johanna and Zelda, although they lived so long ago that no one remembers their true names. Zelda, the elder sister, was very beautiful to look at, but she wasn't kind. In fact, because she was so beautiful, she went through life expecting everyone to do favors for her and let her have her own way, and often enough they did.

Johanna, the younger sister, was different. She was kind to everyone she met, and helpful, especially to the older people in her village. She was always doing favors for them, and she tried to make sure they were comfortable and had enough to eat. Johanna was rather plain to look at - not ugly, but certainly no beauty. Only people who were wise enough to look beneath the surface of things would notice her beautiful spirit shining out through her eyes.

One day Johanna and Zelda were spinning beside the little well that supplied their cottage with water. Johanna was twirling her spindle to twist the thread when she dropped it altogether. The spindle went rolling and bouncing into the well.

"Now look what you've done!" said Zelda. "You better go right down into that well and get that spindle. We can't afford to lose it."

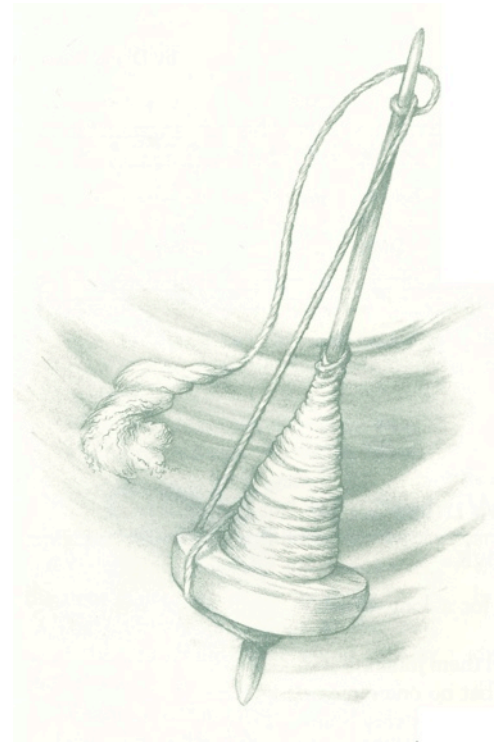
Johanna was afraid, but she knew Zelda was right. They didn't have money to buy another spindle. So she lowered herself carefully into the well and began to climb down the rough stones.

She climbed, down and down and down, until the circle of light from the top of the well became a tiny star, and then disappeared altogether. Still she didn't find the bottom of the well. But she had to go on - she had to get that spindle! So on she went.



After a long, long time, she finally felt solid ground beneath her feet. In surprise, she let go of the stones. The well disappeared, and she was standing in the middle of a broad field of silvery snow. She could see no sign of either sun or moon, but the sky above her seemed to glow with a silvery light, and in the distance she could see a grove of trees with white bark that seemed to shine from within.

Johanna began walking toward the trees, and soon found herself on a path that led beneath them. She walked on, keeping a sharp eye out for her spindle. At last she came to a clearing.



In the center of the clearing was a huge, old apple tree. Its boughs were covered with silvery snow and weighed down by apples with silver-red skin.

"Pick me, pick me!" the apple tree said. "My limbs are going to break under all this fruit. Harvest me! Help me!"

Johanna looked around and saw a big basket at her feet. "I'll help you," she said to the apple tree, and she got right to work. She picked all the apples she could reach, and then she climbed up high into the tree to get all the fruit that grew on the upper branches. As she picked, she began to feel strange and dreamy, to remember all sorts of things she thought she had forgotten, as if the apples were her own memories she was gathering. She grew very tired, but she didn't stop until she had picked the last one. Then she climbed down, thanked the tree for its fruit, shouldered the basket, and started off again.



The path led back into the forest of silvery trees, where silver birds called high above her and silvery gray squirrels ran along the snow-clad branches. She was tired and the basket was heavy, but she continued on, still looking for her spindle. At last she came to another clearing.

In this clearing stood a big, old-fashioned brick oven. In front of the oven was a long wooden table, and on it were trays of unbaked loaves of bread, all nicely risen.

"Bake us! Bake us!" the bread cried out to her. "We will spoil if we aren't baked right away, and for just the right amount of time. Help us!"

"Of course I'll help you," Johanna said. "I know how to bake bread." She set down her basket and put the trays of bread into the oven, and then sat and watched while they baked. Again she felt dreamy and sleepy, but this time she found herself thinking about all the things she wished for and planned to do with her life, as if the loaves of bread were her own hopes and dreams baking. Tired as she was, she didn't let herself fall asleep, but kept checking the bread until it was golden brown and crusty. Then she took it out of the oven, let it cool, and added it to the apples in her basket. She thanked the oven for its bread and started off again.



She walked on through the forest, where silver foxes darted among the trees and white hares left tracks in the snow. At last she came to another clearing, and there she saw a house like none she'd ever seen before.

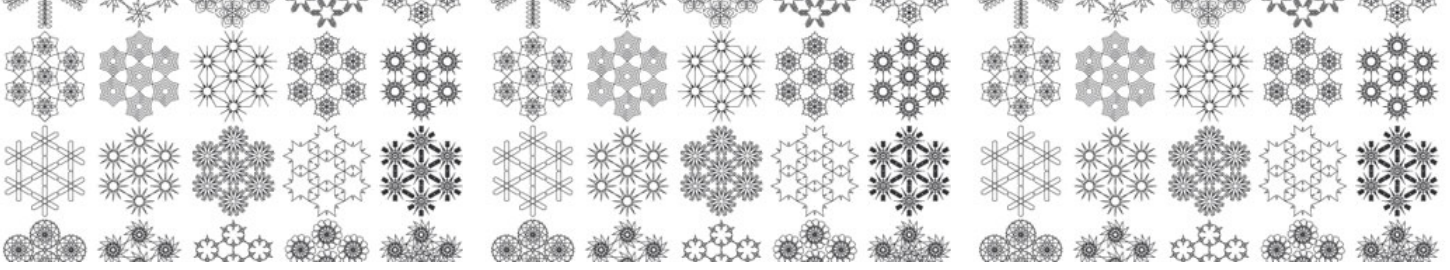
The house was made of every good thing to eat she had ever imagined. The walls were made of honey cake and gingerbread, the roof was shingled with white icing, the steps were blocks of hard candy, and the railings were candy canes. The eaves were studded with peppermints and gumdrops and chocolate kisses.

Johanna was very hungry, but she knew it was not polite to start chomping on somebody's house without asking permission, so she went up to the door, which was made of a big lemon cookie, and knocked.

The door opened, and Johanna saw a woman. At first the woman looked very, very old to her, but when Johanna looked again, she seemed quite young. Her face was as dark as old wood or the young night sky, but when Johanna blinked, the woman was white and pale and silvery as a full moon on a field of snow. One minute Johanna wanted to jump into the woman's arms and cuddle in her lap, but the next minute she found herself almost too afraid to speak to the bright, fierce eyes in the woman's face.

"I am Mother Winter," the woman said. "Who are you who comes knocking at my door?"

"If you please, Mother, I am Johanna," she answered. "I have come searching for my lost spindle, and I bring you a basket of apples I have harvested and bread I have baked."



"You've come to the right place," Mother Winter said. "All lost spindles come to me. And you have brought me good offerings. I will help you, but before I do, you must work for me. You must chop wood to keep me warm, and clean my house, and make my bed."

"Gladly, Mother," Johanna said, and she got right to work. Because she had always helped the people in her village, she knew how to split wood with an axe, sweep floors, and clean the tables and wash the dishes. Mother Winter watched all that she did, and was pleased with her.

"Now all you have to do is go upstairs and make my bed," Mother Winter said. "Be sure to shake my featherbed out of the window, and shake it hard. For I am Mother Winter, and when you shake out my featherbed, you bring snow to the places in the world that get snow and rain to the places that get rain."

So Johanna went upstairs and shook out the featherbed as hard as she could, and sure enough, in the upper world, snow and rain fell on the earth.

"You must be tired and hungry," Mother Winter said. "Come have a drink of my soup, and eat some supper."

On the hearth, Mother Winter had a big cauldron full of steaming soup. She handed Johanna a dipper, and just for a moment Johanna caught a glimpse of what was inside. The brew in the cauldron was dark as the night sky, and studded with swirling stars and snowflakes.

"In my cauldron, you see all your dreams and possibilities," Mother Winter said. "Everything that has been and everything that has not yet come to be is all brewed together. Now have a drink."

Johanna drank, and the soup tasted better than all the candy and cookies in the world. It was nourishing and refreshing and exciting all at once, and yet that one sip satisfied all her hunger.

"Here is your spindle," Mother Winter said, and she handed it back to Johanna. When Johanna took the spindle in her hand, it felt heavy, and when she looked at it, she saw that it had turned to solid gold. Then she and Mother Winter feasted on bread and apples.

"You have done well," Mother Winter said when it was time for Johanna to leave. "You have brought me good offerings. You've fed my fire and cleaned my house, and you have shaken my featherbed good and hard! When you return to your world, you will find you bring gifts with you. For I am the Giver of Gifts and the Teacher of Lessons."



So Johanna returned, all the long way through the silvery woods, past the big oven, past the apple tree, out to the open field where a dark circle hung in the sky like an open mouth. Johanna raised her golden spindle, and a thread of light beamed up into the darkness. Then, as if something above was reeling in the thread, she found herself rising and rising until she could feel the old stones of the well under her hands and feet. She climbed up and up, and at last she clambered out of the well.

Zelda was waiting for her impatiently. "Where have you been?" she asked. "What took you so long? And what has happened to you?"

For Johanna looked quite different from the girl who'd climbed into the well. Her features hadn't changed, but now her plain, kind face seemed to glow with a light of its own, and the goodness of her heart made her quite beautiful. She opened her mouth to tell her sister everything that had happened, and as she spoke, gold and silver and precious stones dropped out of her mouth and covered the ground.

"You've had quite a time, I can see!" Zelda said. She was very jealous. "Why should you get all the good things and me none? I'm going down that well for myself!"

And she hopped over the edge and climbed down the well. Sure enough, she soon found herself in the silvery land, and walked across the snowy field and through the forest path under the silvery trees, until she came to the clearing with the big apple tree.

"Pick me, pick me!" the apple tree said. "My limbs are going to break under all this fruit. Harvest me! Help me!"

"Hah!" Zelda said scornfully. "Do I look like a gardener? Don't you think I have more important things to do than waste my time picking apples? Let them rot!" And she walked on.

Soon she came to the clearing with the old brick oven and the loaves of bread on trays ready to be baked.

"Bake us! Bake us!" the bread cried out to her. "We will spoil if we aren't baked right away, and for just the right amount of time. Help us!"

"Hah!" said Zelda scornfully. "Do I look like a baker? Do you think I have nothing better to do than sit around watching some dumb bread cook? Let it spoil, what do I care?" And she walked on.



Finally she came to Mother Winter's house, made of all the most wonderful things she could imagine to eat. She was hungry, so she broke off a piece of the gingerbread wall and began to eat it.

The door of the house opened, and Mother Winter came out. "I am Mother Winter," she said. "Who are you, and why have you come here? Why are you eating my house without even asking permission?"

"Excuse me?" Zelda said, "I was hungry. I've come because you gave such wonderful things to my sister and I think you should give me some gifts too."

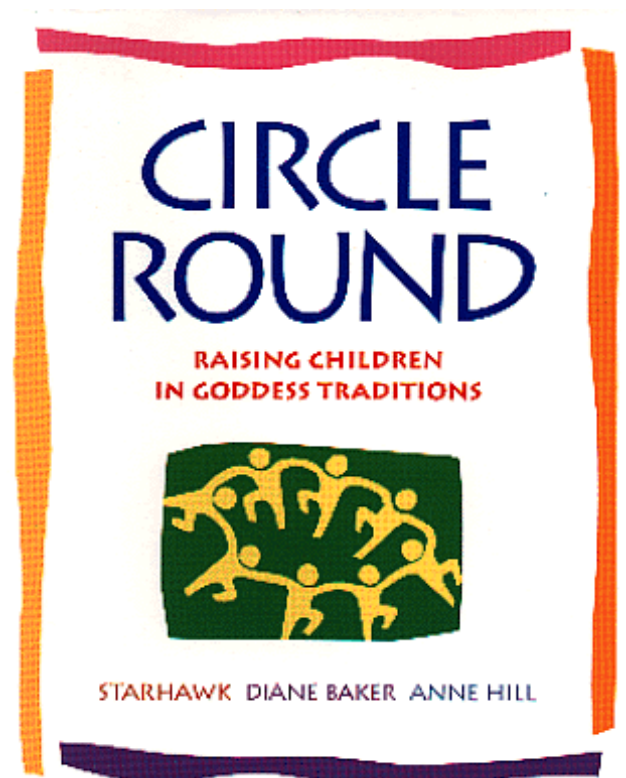
"Oh you do, do you?" Mother Winter said. "What offerings have you brought me?"

"Offerings?" Zelda said. "I didn't know I was supposed to bring offerings. I thought you were the Giver of Gifts."

"I am," Mother Winter said, "but gifts must be earned. You have nibbled at my house without asking permission, and you haven't brought me any offerings, but still I will give you a chance to earn my gifts. You must work for me. You must chop wood to feed my fire, and clean my house and make my bed."

"Do I have to?" Zelda whined. "What do I look like, a housemaid?" But she didn't say it very loud. She went outside to chop wood, but because she had never bothered to help anyone with their chores before, she didn't know how to split a stump or use an axe, and after a few half-hearted tries, she gave up. She gathered a few loose sticks that were lying around and brought them in. Then she tried to sweep the floor, but all she succeeded in doing was stirring up the dust. She wiped the crumbs from the table onto the floor, making it even dirtier, and washed the dishes so badly that food was still sticking to the plates when she put them away.

"Now can I have my gifts?" Zelda asked.



"You have not done well," Mother Winter said. "You have nibbled at my house without asking permission, and you haven't brought me any offerings. You have not fed my fire or cleaned my house. Still, I will give you one more chance. Go upstairs and make my bed. Be sure to shake my featherbed out of the window, and shake it hard. For I am Mother Winter, and when you shake out my feather bed, you bring snow to the places in the world that get snow and rain to the places that get rain."

"Oh, all right." Zelda sighed. She went up stairs and tried to pick up the featherbed, but it seemed too heavy to her.

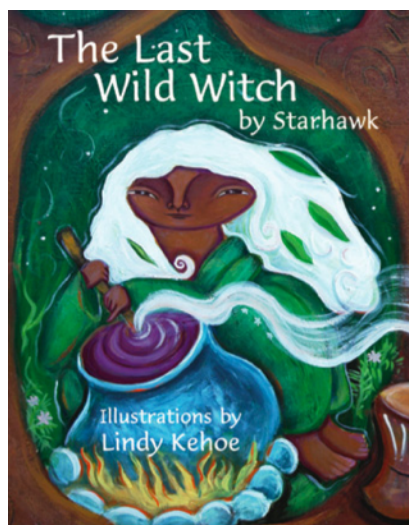
"She'll never know if I shake it out or not," Zelda told herself, and so she just fluffed it a bit on the bed, and went back down. And so in the upper world, there was no snow or rain, and the ground stayed dry and brown and thirsty.

"Now can I have my gifts?" Zelda asked hopefully.

Mother Winter sighed. "You have not done well. You have nibbled at my house without asking permission, and you haven't brought me any offerings. You have not fed my fire or cleaned my house, and you didn't even shake out my featherbed. Still, I will offer you a taste of my soup."

"Soup!" Zelda cried indignantly. "I didn't come her for soup. I came for gold and jewels and beauty like my sister got."

"Very well," Mother Winter said. "I am the Giver of Gifts and the Teacher of Lessons. Return to your world, and you will find you have been given the gifts you deserve."



one of Indy's favorites by
Starhawk

So Zelda went back, all the long way through the silvery forest, past the oven and the apple tree and the field of snow, up the well, and at last she climbed out to find her sister Johanna waiting for her.

"Here I am! Here I am!" Zelda announced.

"But what has happened to you?" Johanna cried. For Zelda had changed. Although her features remained the same, they now seemed as pinched and narrow and twisted as her mean spirit. And when she spoke, clouds of mosquitoes and flies flew out of her mouth.

And so she remained until the end of her days - or at least until she learned a few lessons. Who knows? Maybe she'll go down the well again and do better this time. For Mother Winter is the Teacher of Lessons, who will always give us another chance.

My deep gratitude to Starhawk for sharing this with
the Yogahealer community for the Winter Solstice.

May families everywhere be inspired to connect with
earth-based rhythms.

-- Cate Stillman
www.yogahealer.com