



# THE JUNIPER TREE<sup>1</sup>

*Philipp Otto Runge*<sup>2</sup>

**1.** *juniper tree.* The juniper has a rich folkloric tradition, but it is not especially pertinent to the tree in this tale. The oil, ashes, berries, leaves, and bark are used in many cultures for healing purposes, and it is the therapeutic power of the tree that seems to make it a natural choice as the resting place for the boy. In Russia the juniper tree is a birch; in England it is a rose tree.

**2.** *Philipp Otto Runge.* The version of the story published in the Grimms' collection came from the pen of the Romantic artist Philipp Otto Runge (1777–1810). A master of ornamental detail and decorative art, Runge sent the Grimms a highly stylized narrative that used dialect to convey the impression of “artless” narration. Runge’s version of the story is the only one that weds the biological mother so closely to nature—once she becomes fertile and conceives, she is turned into a virtual prisoner of nature, subject to its laws of growth and decay. An elaborate duet

*With its lurid descriptions of decapitation and cannibalism, “The Juniper Tree” (also known as “My Mother Slew Me; My Father Ate Me”) is probably the most shocking of all fairy tales. In most versions the central character is a boy, yet occasionally, as in the British story “The Rose Tree,” a girl undergoes the transformation into a bird. The scenes of the boy’s beheading by the mother and consumption by the father did not deter P. L. Travers, the British author of Mary Poppins, from describing the tale as “beautiful,” nor did they keep J. R. R. Tolkien from referring to the “beauty and horror” of the story, with its “exquisite and tragic beginning.”*

*The “beauty” of “The Juniper Tree” probably turns less on its aesthetic appeal than on its engagement with anxieties that fascinate us in their evocation of sheer dread. In the stepmother we find a figure who represents maternal power run mad, an incarnation of a natural force so cruel and inexorable that it*

From Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “Von dem Machandelboom,” in *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, 7th ed. (Berlin: Dieterich, 1857; first published, Berlin: Realschulbuchhandlung, 1812).

heightens the weakness and helplessness of the children. In the Grimms' version, the boy is transformed back to human form and reunited with his father and sister to live in a motherless household. But in some versions, as in the Scottish "Pippety Pew," the boy remains a bird, while "the Goodman and his daughter lived happy and died happy."

Although the poignancy of the opening paragraph in "The Juniper Tree" is unsettled by the complexities of the biological mother's associations with nature and death, it still stands in sharp contrast to the horrors of the tale's main events, events engineered largely by the (step)mother. The biological mother is presented as a "natural" foil to the stepmother, who represents self-consciousness and artifice in its most dreaded and dreadful form. The co-presence of birth and death is inscribed in the first scene, then doubled and repeated as rebirth and murder in the body of the tale.

"The Juniper Tree" eliminates both biological mother and stepmother in the end, giving us a tableau in which brother, sister, and father are seated at a table, dining. This is the same "happily ever after" we know from "Hansel and Gretel" and countless other fairy tales. "The Juniper Tree" seems to enact the process of growing away from the mother, who in our culture represents dependence and domesticity, and turning to the father, who, by virtue of his traditional absence from early child-rearing, comes to signify autonomy. By crushing the mother and joining the father, the children "successfully" negotiate the path from dependence to autonomy. It is important to bear in mind that versions of this tale and others are sacred only as cultural documents mapping the developmental routes of another era. Enough has changed and is changing since Runge recorded this tale for us to begin producing variants on this cultural story, which demonizes mothers in a powerful way and represents fathers as passive and detached.

coordinates the rhythms of the child's gestation period with nature's seasonal changes.

3. *as many as two thousand years ago.* The specification of an era is unusual in fairy tales. The figure of two thousand years anchors the tale in biblical times and suggests a connection with the origins of Christianity. In light of the boy's death and resurrection, the date has a special significance.

4. *they had no children.* This fairy tale, like so many others, begins with "lack" and moves to the liquidation of the lack, which in turn produces a new motor to the plot, in this case the death of the biological mother. Like many fairy-tale couples, this one is childless, and, rather than just wishing for a child, the two pray. Many couples make desperate wishes that lead to the birth of some type of animal—a hedgehog, for example, in the Grimms' story "Hans My Hedgehog."

5. *peeling an apple under the tree.* The apple reappears as the object of desire that leads to the boy's death. Note also the connection with the apple that is used to tempt and poison Snow White.

6. *as red as blood and as white as snow.* The story resembles "Snow White" in many ways, especially because its plot turns on the conflict between stepmother and child. But note that in this case it is a little boy whose lips are as red as blood and whose skin is as white as snow. Most versions of this particular tale type do not include the background story about the death of the biological mother.

7. *A month went by, and the snow melted.* In the paragraph that follows, the parallels drawn between the seasons and the woman's gestation period are elaborated in a man-



LONG TIME AGO, as many as two thousand years ago,<sup>3</sup> there was a rich man who had a beautiful and pious wife. They loved each other dearly, but they had no children,<sup>4</sup> even though they longed to have them. Day and night the wife prayed for a child, but still they had none.

In front of the house there was a garden, and in the garden there grew a juniper tree. Once, in the wintertime, the wife was peeling an apple under the tree,<sup>5</sup> and while she was peeling it, she cut her finger. Blood dripped on the snow. "Ah," said the woman, and she sighed deeply. "If only I had a child as red as blood and as white as snow!"<sup>6</sup> After she said that, she began to feel better, for she had a feeling that something would come of it. And she went back into the house.

A month went by, and the snow melted.<sup>7</sup> Two months passed, and everything had become green. Three months went by, and flowers were sprouting from the ground. Four months passed, and all the trees in the woods were growing tall, with their green branches intertwining. The woods echoed with the song of birds, and blossoms were falling from the trees. And so the fifth month went by. And when the woman sat under the juniper tree, her heart leaped for joy because the tree was so fragrant. She fell to her knees and was beside herself with happiness. When the sixth month had passed, the fruit grew large and firm, and she became very quiet. In the seventh month she picked the berries from the juniper tree and gorged herself on them until she became miserable and ill. After the eighth month went by, she called her husband and, in tears, said to him: "If I die, bury me under the juniper tree." After that she felt better and was calm until the ninth month had passed. Then she bore a child as

white as snow and as red as blood. When she saw the child, she was so happy that she died of joy.<sup>8</sup>

The woman's husband buried her under the juniper tree, and he wept day after day. After a while he felt better, but he still cried from time to time. Eventually he stopped, and then he took a second wife.

The man had a daughter with his second wife. The child from the first marriage had been a little boy, as red as blood and as white as snow. Whenever the woman looked at her daughter, she felt love for her, but whenever she looked at the little boy, she felt sick at heart. It seemed that no matter where he went he was always in the way, and she kept wondering how she could make sure that her daughter eventually inherited everything.<sup>9</sup> The devil got hold of her so that she began to hate the little boy, and she slapped him around and pinched him here and cuffed him there. The poor child lived in terror, and when he came home from school, he had no peace at all.

One day the woman went into the pantry. Her little daughter followed her and asked: "Mother, will you give me an apple?"

"All right, my child," said the woman, and she gave her a beautiful apple from a chest that had a big heavy lid with a sharp iron lock on it.

"Mother," asked the little girl, "Can Brother have one too?"

The woman was irritated, but she said: "Yes, he can have one when he gets back from school."

When the woman looked out the window and saw the boy walking home, it was as if the devil had taken hold of her,<sup>10</sup> and she snatched the apple out of her daughter's hand and said: "You can't have one before your brother." Then she tossed the apple into the chest and shut it.

The little boy walked in the door, and the devil got her to whisper sweetly to him and say: "My son, would you like an apple?" But she gave him a look filled with hate.

"Mother," said the little boy, "What a scary look! Yes, give me an apple."

nered style more characteristic of fiction than of fairy tales. Runge was no doubt hoping to create a poetic effect with the descriptions of nature.

**8.** *she was so happy that she died of joy.* Many historians have pointed out that the high rate of mortality in childbirth may have motivated the prominence of stepmothers in fairy tales. Like Cinderella and Snow White, the little boy in this story suffers under the cruel regime of his stepmother.

**9.** *make sure that her daughter eventually inherited everything.* The inheritance issue creates friction even today in many blended families. In "The Juniper Tree" anxiety about dividing the patrimony is spelled out as a key factor in motivating the stepmother's hatred of the boy.

**10.** *it was as if the devil had taken hold of her.* The presence of the devil as a motivating force suggests that the teller of this tale was influenced by religious beliefs. Note that the stepmother's duplicity is connected with a diabolical force that incarnates the spirit of division and divisiveness.



LUDWIG RICHTER,  
“*The Juniper Tree*,” 1857

With grim determination, the stepmother slams the lid of the chest on the boy and beheads him. The sun streaming in the window suggests that she will not be able to conceal her crimes.

When the little boy bent down, the devil prompted her, and *bam!* She slammed the lid down so hard that the boy’s head flew off and fell into the chest with the apples. Then she was overcome with fear and thought: “How am I going to get out of this?” She went to her room and took a white kerchief from her dresser drawer. She put the boy’s head back on his neck and tied the scarf around it so that you couldn’t tell that anything was wrong. Then she sat him down on a chair in front of the door and put an apple in his hand.

Later on Little Marlene came into the kitchen to see her mother, who was standing by the fire, madly stirring a pot of hot water. “Mother,” said Little Marlene, “Brother is sitting by the door and looks pale. He has an apple in his hand, and when I asked him to give me the apple, he wouldn’t answer. It was very scary.”

“Go back to him,” the mother said, “and if he doesn’t give you an answer, slap his face.”

Little Marlene went back to him and said: “Brother, give me the apple.”

Her brother wouldn’t answer. So Marlene gave him a slap, and his head went flying off. She was so terrified that she began to howl and weep. Then she ran to her mother

and said: "Mother, I've knocked Brother's head right off!" And she was crying so hard that she couldn't stop.

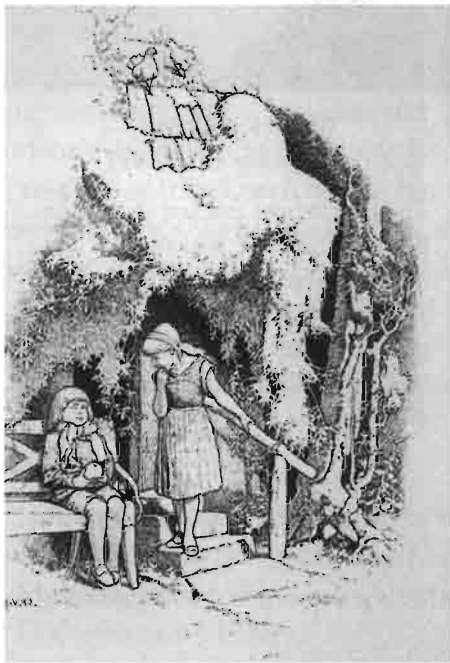
"Little Marlene," said her mother, "what a dreadful thing you've done! But don't breathe a word to a soul, for there's nothing we can do. We'll cook him up in a stew."

The mother then took the little boy and chopped him up.<sup>11</sup> She put the pieces into a pot and cooked them up into a stew. Little Marlene stood by the fire and wept so hard that the stew didn't need any salt at all because of her tears.

When the father came home, he sat down at the table and said: "Where's my son?"

The mother brought in a huge dish of stew, and Little Marlene was weeping so hard that she couldn't stop.

**11.** *The mother then took the little boy and chopped him up.* The stepmother's serving up of the boy in a stew is reminiscent of the Greek myth in which Atreus prepares a banquet for his enemy Thyestes, who unknowingly feasts on his own sons. Her deed is also reminiscent of dismemberment scenes in other fairy tales (most notably Perrault's "Bluebeard" and the Grimms' "Fitcher's Bird"). The powerful resurrection scene at the end forges a connection with the dismemberment of the Egyptian god Osiris as well as of the Greek poet Orpheus, who is torn to pieces by the maenads.



HERMANN VOGEL,  
"The Juniper Tree," 1893

"'Mother,' said Little Marlene, 'Brother is sitting by the door and looks pale. He has an apple in his hand, and when I asked him to give me the apple, he wouldn't answer. It was very scary.'" Little Marlene ponders her brother's condition, wondering why he is so pale. The scarf tied around his neck conceals the stepmother's crime.



KAY NIELSEN,  
*"The Juniper Tree,"* 1925

"A mist arose from the tree, and in the middle of the mist a flame was burning, and from the flame a beautiful bird emerged and began singing gloriously." Little Marlene watches in awe as the bird, of the same hue as her dress, emerges from the flame.



WARWICK GOBLE,  
*"The Juniper Tree,"* 1923

The bird, whose feathers match the hues of his half sister's cap and dress, emerges in all his glory from the flame in the tree. The bird's plumage, the girl's hair, and the tree's branches create a dramatic effect linking the girl with the bird.

"Where's my son?" the father asked again.

"Oh," said the mother, "he went off to the country to visit his mother's great-uncle. He is planning to stay there a while."

"What's he going to do there? He didn't even say good-bye to me."

"Well, he really wanted to go, and he asked if he could stay for six weeks. They'll take good care of him."

"Oh, that makes me so sad," said the husband. "It's not right. He should have said good-bye."

Then he began eating and said: "Little Marlene, why are you crying? Your brother will be back soon." And he

said: "Oh, dear wife, this stew tastes so good! Give me some more."

The more the father ate, the more he wanted. "Give me some more," he said. "No one else can have any of it. Somehow I feel as if it's all for me."

The father kept eating, and he threw the bones under the table until he had finished everything. Meanwhile, Little Marlene went to her dresser and got her best silk kerchief. She picked up all the bones from beneath the table, tied them up in her silk kerchief, and carried them outside. She began weeping bitter tears. She put the bones down in the green grass under the juniper tree. After she had put them down, she suddenly felt much better and stopped crying. The juniper tree began stirring. Its branches parted and came back together again as though it were clapping its hands for joy. A mist arose from the tree, and in the middle of the mist a flame was burning, and from the flame a beautiful bird emerged<sup>12</sup> and began singing gloriously. It soared up in the air, and then vanished. The tree was as it had been before, but the kerchief with the bones was gone. Little Marlene felt so happy and relieved because it seemed as if her brother were still alive. She returned home feeling happy and sat down at the table to eat.

Meanwhile, the bird flew away, perched on the roof of a goldsmith's house, and began singing:

"My mother, she slew me,  
My father, he ate me,  
My sister, Little Marlene,  
Gathered up my bones,  
Tied them up in silk,  
And put them under the juniper tree.  
Tweet, tweet, what a fine bird I am!"

The goldsmith was sitting in his shop, making a chain of gold. He heard the bird singing on his roof, and he found its song very beautiful. He got up and, while walking across the threshold, lost a slipper. Still, he kept right

**12. a beautiful bird emerged.** The boy's transformation resonates with the many mythological metamorphoses from human to bird (Procne and Philomela) but is also linked to the powerful role of birds in the Grimms' fairy tales. In "Cinderella," to cite just one example, the heroine takes refuge in a dovecote, is helped with her chores by birds, and witnesses the blinding of her stepsisters by doves.

on going out into the middle of the street with only one sock and one slipper on. He was also wearing his apron, and in one hand he had the golden chain, in the other his tongs. The sun was shining brightly on the street. He stopped to look at the bird and said: "Bird, you sing so beautifully. Sing me that song again."

"No," said the bird. "I never sing a second time for nothing. Give me that golden chain, and I'll sing for you again."

"Here," said the goldsmith. "Here's the golden chain. Now sing that song again."

The bird came swooping down. Grasping the golden chain in its right claw, it perched in front of the goldsmith and began singing:

"My mother, she slew me,  
My father, he ate me,  
My sister, Little Marlene,  
Gathered up my bones,  
Tied them up in silk,  
And put them under the juniper tree.  
Tweet, tweet, what a fine bird I am!"

Then the bird flew off to a shoemaker's house, perched on the roof and sang:

"My mother, she slew me,  
My father, he ate me,  
My sister, Little Marlene,  
Gathered up my bones,  
Tied them up in silk,  
And put them under the juniper tree.  
Tweet, tweet, what a fine bird I am!"

When the shoemaker heard the song, he ran out the door in his shirtsleeves and looked up at the roof. He had to put his hand over his eyes to keep the sun from blinding him. "Bird," he said, "You sing so beautifully." Then he called into the house: "Wife, come out here for a moment.

There's a bird up there. See it? How beautifully it is singing!"

The shoemaker called his daughter and her children, his apprentices, the hired hand, and the maid. They all came running out into the street to look at the bird and to admire its beauty. It had red and green feathers, and around its neck was a band of pure gold, and the eyes in its head sparkled like stars.

"Bird," said the shoemaker, "sing that song again."

"No," said the bird, "I never sing a second time for nothing. You have to give me something."

"Wife," said the man, "go up to the attic. On the top shelf you'll find a pair of red shoes. Get them for me."

His wife went and got the shoes.

"Here," said the man. "Now sing that song again."

The bird came swooping down. Taking the shoes in its left claw, it flew back up on the roof and sang:

"My mother, she slew me,  
My father, he ate me,  
My sister, Little Marlene,  
Gathered up my bones,  
Tied them up in silk,  
And put them under the juniper tree.  
Tweet, tweet, what a fine bird I am!"

When the bird had finished the song, it flew away. It had the chain in its right claw and the shoes in its left, and it flew far away to a mill. The mill went "Clickety-clack, clickety-clack, clickety-clack." Inside the mill sat twenty of the miller's men, hewing a stone, "Hick hack hick hack hick hack." And the mill kept going "Clickety-clack, clickety-clack, clickety-clack." And so the bird went and perched on a linden tree outside the mill and sang:

"My mother, she slew me . . ."

And one of the men stopped working.

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"My father, he ate me . . ."

And two more stopped working and listened,

"My sister, Little Marlene . . ."

Then four men stopped working.

"Gathered up my bones,  
Tied them up in silk,"

Now only eight were still hewing,

"And put them under . . ."

now only five,

". . . the juniper tree."

now only one.

"Tweet, tweet, what a fine bird I am!"

The last one stopped to listen to the final words. "Bird," he said, "you sing so beautifully! Let me hear the whole thing too. Sing that song again."

"I never sing the second time for nothing. If you give me the millstone, I'll sing the song again."

"If it belonged to me alone," he said, "I would give it to you."

"If the bird sings again," the others said, "it can have the millstone."

Then the bird swooped down, and the miller's men, all twenty of them, set the beam to and raised up the stone. "Heave-ho-hup, heave-ho-hup, heave-ho-hup." And the bird stuck its neck through the hole, put the stone on as if it were a collar, flew back to the tree, and sang:

"My mother, she slew me,  
My father, he ate me,  
My sister, Little Marlene,  
Gathered up my bones,  
Tied them up in silk,  
And put them under the juniper tree.  
Tweet, tweet, what a fine bird I am!"

When the bird had finished its song, it spread its wings. In its right claw was the chain, in its left claw the shoes, and around its neck was the millstone. Then it flew away, far away to the house of its father.

The father, mother, and Little Marlene were sitting at the table in the parlor, and the father said: "How happy I am! My heart feels so light."

"Not me," said the mother. "I feel frightened, as if a big storm were brewing."

Meanwhile, Little Marlene just sat there weeping. The bird flew up, and, when it landed on the roof, the father said: "How happy I'm feeling. And outside the sun is shining so brightly! I feel as if I'm about to see an old friend again."

"I don't," said the woman. "I'm so scared that my teeth are chattering, and I feel as if there's fire running through my veins."

She tore at her bodice to loosen it, while Little Marlene sat there weeping. She held her apron up to her eyes and wept so hard that it was completely soaked with tears. The bird swooped down to the juniper tree, perched on a branch, and sang:

"My mother, she slew me . . ."

The mother stopped up her ears and closed her eyes, for she didn't want to see or hear anything, but the roaring in her ears was like the wildest possible storm, and her eyes burned and flashed like lightning.

"My father, he ate me . . ."

"Oh, Mother," said the man, "there's a beautiful bird out there, and it's singing so gloriously. The sun is shining so warmly, and the air smells like cinnamon."

"My sister, Little Marlene . . ."

Little Marlene put her head in her lap and just kept crying and crying. But the husband said: "I'm going outside. I've got to see this bird close up."

"Oh, don't go," said the wife. "It feels as if the whole house is shaking and about to go up in flames!"

But the husband went out and looked at the bird.

Gathered up my bones,  
Tied them up in silk,  
And put them under the juniper tree.  
Tweet, tweet, what a fine bird I am!"

After finishing its song, the bird dropped the golden chain, and it fell right around the man's neck, hanging perfectly. He went inside and said: "Just look at that fine bird out there! It gave me this beautiful golden chain, almost as beautiful as it is."

The woman was so terrified that she fell right down on the floor, and the cap she was wearing came off her head. And once again the bird sang:

"My mother, she slew me . . ."

"Oh, if only I were a thousand feet under the ground so that I wouldn't have to listen to this!"

"My father, he ate me . . ."

Then the woman fell down again as if dead.

"My sister, Little Marlene . . ."

"Oh," said Little Marlene. "I want to go outside and see if the bird will give me something too." And she went out.

"Gathered up my bones,  
Tied them up in silk . . ."

And the bird tossed her the shoes.

"And put them under the juniper tree.  
Tweet, tweet, what a fine bird I am!"

Little Marlene felt lighthearted and happy. She put on the new red shoes and came dancing and skipping into the house.

"Oh," Little Marlene said, "I was so sad when I went out, and now I feel so cheerful. What a fine bird that is out there. It gave me a pair of red shoes."

The woman jumped to her feet, and her hair stood straight on end like tongues of flame. "It's as if the world is coming to an end. If I go outside, maybe I'll feel better too."

The woman went over to the door and, *bam!* the bird dropped the millstone on her head<sup>13</sup> and crushed her to death. The father and Little Marlene heard the crash and went outside. Smoke, flames, and fire were rising up from the spot, and when they vanished, Little Brother was back, standing right there. He took his father and Little Marlene by the hand, and the three of them were overcome with joy. Then they went back in the house, sat down at the table, and dined.<sup>14</sup>

**13.** *the bird dropped the millstone on her head.* Many critics have associated the millstone that crushes the stepmother with a biblical millstone that drowns those who injure the young and the innocent: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:5–6).

**14.** *sat down at the table, and dined.* The trio at the end partakes of a meal, almost as if it were a sacrament, recalling the sacrilege of the stew served up to the father. Yet here the dining ritual renews and restores the new family.