

Yule's Eve

Winter is the favourite time for Trow's, for with winter, comes Yuletide, and as everyone on Orkney knows, this is when the Trow hordes are given permission to come above ground. And as the darkness and cold creeps in, the Trow's leave behind their homes in the hollow hills to cause mischief all across the islands.

It was Tulya's E'en, seven days before Yule, and in her little croft, Bodil was starting her preparations for Yuletide. She woke her two children as soon as the day broke, and once they had eaten, she had them go out to the herd and pluck a hair from the tail of every beast. As they did, Bodil herself began pleating straw into small crosses to hang around the house. It was while she worked, and while the children were in the fields that her neighbour Taina came to visit.

"Oh it's terrible!" said Taina "Have you heard?"

"Heard what?" asked Bodil

"It's poor Farmer Marwick. The Trow's have got him."

"What happened?"

Apparently, Marwick had been out walking the night before, when a group of the hill-folk, out a little earlier than they should have been, jumped from behind some stones and surrounded him. Now Marwick knew how to deal with Trow's, and he quickly searched through his pockets and found a little knife. He fell down to the ground and scored a hasty circle all around himself. The Trow's advanced on him, but could not pass the circle. And so it went all night, Trow's all around him and poor Marwick unable to cross the line.

"They found him this morning, in the circle, dying of the cold." said Taina.

"You should gather your children in now."

So Bodil brought the children back in from the fields, and just as she'd asked, they had taken a hair from each beast. Bodil pleated all these together and hung them over the house alongside an ear of corn. Finally, she placed a straw cross at the outermost points of her land.

"There," said Bodil "Well done, we have made our sainin. Now our house, our herd and our crops are safe from any Trow's."

But just to be sure, Bodil kept the children indoors for the next week, and stayed with them at all times.

On Yule's Eve, the final preparations were made. Bodil helped her children to make the Yule Cakes, little oatcakes shaped like the sun, and then they all cleaned the house from top to bottom. Once everything had been cleaned, they all washed their feet and hands, dropping three coals into the water.

"Mother, why do we put coal in the water?" asked the eldest child.

"Well, " said Bodil "this stops Trow's from stealing the power from your feet and hands."

Bodil threw out the dirty water and they all put on a clean set of clothes, only then were all the doors and windows unlocked and an iron key or blade set next to them.

"Mother, why do you unlock all the doors if we don't want the Trow's to come in." asked the youngest child.

"Well," said she "it's not only Trow's who are out on Yule, but the spirits of our ancestors. And if they should come to visit, they can enter freely. The iron will keep the Trow's away."

But there was one thing Bodil had forgotten, and that was to set a peat fire. And just as she was lighting it, a Trow jumped down the chimney. The fire took up nicely, but it was too late, the Trow was in the house. And this was Belia, a nasty little she-Trow. Bodil knew that Belia would wreck her home if she didn't act quickly. She had a blade in her pocket, but if she scratched a circle around herself, her children would be left in danger. And she didn't have enough time to get to her children to draw a circle around them. Suddenly Bodil remembered hearing that if you met a Trow's gaze and refused to look away, the Trow is unable to move. So that's exactly what she did. Bodil stared right at the little Trow-wife, holding it still as she went to her children. But Belia was cunning, for she took up the tongs from the fire. "If you don't blink," she smiled "I'll put out your eyes."

Quickly, Bodil drew her little circle, holding her children near to her as Belia advanced. But when she got to the edge of the circle, she could go no further. Seeing she was beaten, she dropped the tongs and looked around. There were iron keys by every door and horsehoes and blades by each window. There was only one thing for her to do, Belia jumped onto the fire and back up the chimney, howling all the way.

Laughing Bodil stoked up the fire and set a little candle in the window. The candle burned down, night passed and gradually light crept back across the land. And the Trow's crawled back under their stones down into their kingdom beneath the hills until next winter.