

# Maundering Women

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What can a Grimms storyteller show us about our own narrative moment?

For a silver spoon and a taste of wine, Dorothea Viehmann arrives at the Grimm brothers' house in Kassel. Over months, the old woman will sit in their living room and tell more than forty stories, her delivery so exact the Grimms often copy it word for word. Her characters will go down in history: The devil's grandmother. The peasant's wise daughter. The shining prince stepping from an iron stove. A "clever Elsie" who is both a fool and an everywoman, and some days, me, and maybe you.



Imagine Viehmann, a tailor's wife, perched on that upper class furniture, her hands scarred by decades of labor, her body bowed and stretched from seven births. As her stories poured out, as the Grimm brothers scribbled furiously, I wonder how the sudden transformation struck her. Hour after hour, day by day, she was watching her voice turn to ink, and her story to page, a metamorphosis as profound as a boy to a raven, or a girl to a rose. To go on, to outlast time, that is one of the deepest longings of a writer, far deeper than the wish to be recognized or paid. As authors today face one of the greatest threats and opportunities in our living history, I see that sage old woman basking in the possibilities of her new incarnation, but also curious as to its price.

Only once have I told stories hour after hour, day by day. Those are the ones I will never write.



The Grimm brothers' first volume of *Kinder und Hausmärchen*, in 1812, marked a beginning. The brothers dreamed of assembling a German folklore for a German people struggling under Napoleonic rule. They were also in a race against time. Cheaper print books and fifty years of free public education had raised literacy rates and chipped away at the old oral storytelling culture in Hessian lands.

Many of the Grimms' 1812 fairy tales were reshuffled narratives from Italian and French collections. The Grimms sought an authentic voice from the *Volk*.

Dorothea Viehmann was the daughter of an innkeeper at a country crossroads. She married a tailor at age twenty-two, bearing him seven children; three died young. When she met the Grimms, at almost sixty years old, Viehmann had five living daughters and hungry grandchildren. She grew vegetables and sold them at the market to earn extra cash, but times were lean and French taxes high. In the spring of 1813, at their meetings in Kassel, Viehmann needed the brothers' money to feed her extended family. The brothers needed her tales to feed their next book. And they needed her identity. Her archetype.

"A maundering old woman," is how Boccaccio once put it, "at the home fireside, making up tales of Hell, the fates, Ghosts, and the like . . . to scare the little ones, or divert the young ladies, or amuse the old, or at least show the power of fortune."

Two years after Viehmann's collaboration with the Grimms began, she fell ill and died. Her immortality launched the same year, 1815, with the publication of the brothers' Volume Two, a book that would cement their reputations and lead to seven editions in their lifetimes.

The frontispiece of the pivotal volume features a portrait of Dorothea. She gazes sideways with a rueful expression, but the lines around her mouth and eyes suggest a face that could mobilize with humor and theatricality. She wears a dark cap with a single ribbon, a modest dress, her right hand folded over her left. The embodiment of wise old age. In the volume's foreword, the Grimms credit Dorothea Viehmann for her impeccable storytelling. The

farmer's wife, though she was not. The authentic Hessian voice, though she was not exactly that either.



A maundering woman is a repository rather than author. A curator rather than artist. She knows her listener's tastes. She channels. She provides. I had a sick child. For years. He could not get well, and if not for a few variables, he might have died or lived a blighted life. When Bowie was four years old, his father and I sublet a dim, elegant apartment near the pediatric hospital in San Francisco. Together with his doctors, we planned to see our son through a bone marrow transplant for an autoimmune disease that caused thousands of bleeding ulcers in his digestive tract. The transplant was a radical procedure. Bowie would be the youngest patient in America to receive it for his condition, but after dozens of drugs, transfusions, special diets, Eastern treatments, and even an attempt at healing through total intravenous nutrition, no food or drink allowed, we had passed beyond all the well-traveled cures and arrived at experiment.

I walked a lot that year. It is impossible not to cherish walking in San Francisco. Each neighborhood is like the postage stamp on a different love letter to the world. You can climb over a hill of fog-socked modernist cul-de-sacs and descend into a tidy hamlet with coffeeshops, a "cheese boutique," and a steep park where goats graze in summer to reduce the probability of wildfire. An Alpine sun will strike the roses at a flower store in Cole Valley and blur to a gray haze, thirty blocks away, in the Sunset, outside a Chinese dumpling house. The high ringing tones of the MUNI mingle with the scent of eucalyptus trees and the sea.

"If you have anger," a yoga teacher told me that year, "burn out your thighs. We carry anger in our thighs."

I was angry. Heartsick. Each day, we flushed our son's lost blood down the toilet and wondered when to schedule his next transfusion. We watched Bowie's teeth blacken with iron supplements, and his growth stop on steroids, and his arms puncture with needle sticks. Although I could not see it clearly myself, our child's puffed face became ghoulish, his smile unsettling. But I did notice the pity in others' eyes. I registered their doubletakes, their kind, uncertain greetings.

That year I strode through San Francisco's beautiful neighborhoods to shift my anger, to budge it earthward, to make it haul me instead of eat me alive. Although Bowie was close to four years old, he was often weak, so I pushed him in the stroller. We walked to the Haight to buy a Spider-Man comic. We walked to Stow Lake, CalAcademy, the branch library, the playground with the old concrete slide. We could go farther with the stroller and spend a longer day escaping the apartment, which was good for a lonely child whose health was too unpredictable to attend preschool. To make the miles entertaining for both of us, I began to tell Bowie the stories of Hawley Hospital.



Dorothea Viehmann's defining stories focus on the lower class: army veterans, resentful servants, and especially the peasant wife. In the brilliant and enigmatic "Clever Elsie," a suitor named Hans comes to dine and evaluate Elsie as a future bride. When the beer runs out, the mother sends Elsie to the cellar to fetch more. It's an easy task, beer fetching. Go downstairs, open the barrel tap, fill the pitcher, return. But Elsie complicates it by looking beyond the barrel, at the wall, where the stone masons have left a pickaxe. At the sight of the tool, she begins to weep.

"If I get Hans, and we have a child, and he grows big, and we send him into the cellar here to draw beer, then the pickaxe will fall on his head and kill him," she realizes aloud.

At this revelation, she wails until the other family members realize she has been gone too long. They send a servant to find Elsie.

Ask most readers what might happen next, and they'd say the servant tells Elsie not to be sad, that she can't know what will happen to her future child, and she ought to go flirt with Hans before it's too late. He's her only suitor, after all.

Instead, Elsie's grief so compels the servant that the servant also starts sobbing. And on it goes until the whole family is crying in the dark basement. When Hans discovers them all, he decides Elsie is smart enough for him to marry.

While "Clever Elsie" follows the fairy tale's usual progress toward attachment (weddings, births), Elsie's choices expose the shadow side of wifehood in Viehmann's era. The pickaxe on the cellar wall could be any number of

ghastly childhood diseases, or starvation, abuse, or war. To marry was to give birth, in most cases. To give birth was to accept death. And grief.

Viehmänn herself had not been spared this suffering, having lost three children and strained to feed the others.



To understand the stories I told my son that year, you must know a little about the boy. Bowie liked books from every section of the library, especially fiction, history, and the biology of animals. “I think I don’t understand everything yet,” he confided wistfully the day he turned four. With adults, he beamed, he charmed. Other children thrilled and flustered him. He did not comprehend their lack of adoration or pity, or how easily their muscles bunched for leaps and climbs. He loved to draw, to finish puzzles, to knock his way through stacks of pillows. He also lived through days of pained immobility (“too tight, too tight,” he muttered, clutching his gut) and mornings of retching blood, tubes shoved up his nose, his parents eating quickly in another room while he played alone, fed by the milky stream of an IV.



In 1755, the year that Dorothea Viehmänn was born, Samuel Johnson published his dictionary of English. Six decades later, Viehmänn died in the late autumn, just a month before Jane Austen’s *Emma* appeared. Within Viehmänn’s lifetime also came the invention of the steam engine, the telegraph, the cotton gin, the power loom, and the battery. A human evolution so fast it staggers the mind. How this filtered into lower-middle-class German domestic life is hard to say, but the second half of “Clever Elsie” continues Viehmänn’s interrogation of womanhood, and sends Elsie from the terror of losing a child toward a broader existential horror.

In part two, married now, Elsie goes to a field to cut corn, at Hans’s request. Here is another juncture where a simple choice (harvest food) does not lead to a simple consequence, but a maze of options for Elsie. She could cut corn. Or she could eat. Or she could sleep. And she does, eat and sleep, instead of doing her job. When Hans finds her slumbering in the cornfield,

he hangs sheep bells on her. Is this a punishment? A gentle joke? We don't know, because Hans goes home.

When Elsie wakes, the sound of the bells astonishes her. Who is she, if she is ringing? Elsie has never rung before. Is she Elsie?

She runs back to the house to ask. She raps on the door.

"Hans," she cries. "Is Elsie inside?"

Hans says yes. From this, Elsie concludes she is not Elsie, after all, because the real one is within her home. The gaslighting of her selfhood complete, Elsie runs out of the story. The end. But Viehmann's end is a non-ending, especially for a fairy tale. We don't know if Elsie comes to harm or freedom, only that she is gone. She no longer fits the convention of her life: A good wife works until she dies. With this subversive twist, Viehmann's moral pivots from a lesson to a question. *Who is Elsie? Why can't she find her self herself?*



Hawley Hospital, my narrative invention for our meandering stroller rides that year, was a hospital for magical ailments. Its famous doctor, Dr. Hawley, had gone missing. An intrepid boy named Jonah set out to find out what happened to the doctor and to rescue him. Did Jonah have magic powers? I can't remember. I recall a villain who taught at Jonah's school and an intrigue about charmed water that involved the whole town, but the plot is as lost in my memory as the exact routes we walked in the Inner Sunset, across sidewalks and paths, up steep hills and down. Only some landmarks remain, especially this one: The kid ultimately saved the doctor. This was the core story, the agency of my son's life reversed. Both of us would witness it together. Bowie needed rescuing. Jonah rescued. Bowie was often stuck at home, with me or his father. Jonah ranged free, saving his world on his own.

I knew I would never write down the stories of Hawley Hospital. They weren't meant to be fixed by text, or given to anyone but me and my son. We never reached an ending, because the bone marrow transplant—harrowing as it was—succeeded in putting Bowie into remission. After the sublet expired, we moved residences and Bowie grew strong enough to walk distances and to go to preschool and kindergarten. The adventures of Hawley Hospital existed only in the air between us as we traveled through that time, me on foot and him on wheels. And then, like a season, they faded.



In 2009, leading American fairy tale scholar Ruth B. Bottigheimer published a book called *Fairy Tales: A New History*. The slim volume repudiates a long-held belief: that unlettered peasants—particularly women—invented stories and passed them by word of mouth for generations, until historians like the Grimm brothers recorded and shaped them into text. Instead, Bottigheimer argues that many of the tales in Grimms' first volume, like "Cinderella" and "Rapunzel," may have been repurposed from earlier European writers whose work was available in print, if not to the Grimms, who'd been raised with a limited, strictly religious library, then to their mostly well-off female friends who gathered and shared their "folk" tales.

Who cares whether those wonderful classic narratives derived from oral tradition or from books? Why is this distinction significant? Because we believe that there is a difference between stories that originate with working people, that are recounted in fields and by the fire, and stories that are inked down in wealthy drawing rooms and libraries. We believe that the first kind of story arises from experience, and the second arises from the imagination. We believe the oral wisdom is different, too, that it is collective rather than individual, that it belongs to a people instead of to one man, or to one woman. Even in the frenetic, divisive twenty-first century, we do not want to let go of the notion of our narrative past as a common enterprise, our magic and wisdom a collective creation.

Central to that collective creation are mothers and servants, often the first storytellers in a child's life.

In order to justify their project as the model of German patriotism, the Grimm brothers needed Dorothea Viehmann. They needed her talent and her working-class status, even if they knew she was also literate, of Huguenot descent, and likely spoke French as well as English. They cloaked the parts of her identity that contradicted their vision of the old Hessian peasant wife and credited her effusively for the rest. They smudged her into a symbol, and it wasn't until centuries later that scholars would see Dorothea Viehmann as the distinctive individual she was.



*Maunder*, if you don't already know, means to *ramble*. To stray from the path.

As a girl, I did not like Clever Elsie's tale.

How could anyone be so stupid as to confuse the simple tasks before her?

As a woman, a mother, I did not expect how much I would appreciate her example, how I would sometimes weep with Elsie, and flee with her, ringing, in search of another me.



In 1839, an English single-volume edition called *Gammer Grethel: German Fairy Tales and Popular Stories* repackaged Dorothea Viehmann into Gammer Grethel, an old peasant woman who told the author 350 pages of stories over twelve evenings, starting with Christmas Eve. Less than four decades after her death, Viehmann had disappeared into her own legend, having never earned a pfennig in royalties.

An oh-so-familiar tale of appropriation, right? And yet. To define Dorothea Viehmann's legacy as purely a theft and erasure is a twenty-first-century, Western individualist take on textual authorship as a terminus instead of a station on a very long track of human storytelling. Viehmann was an innkeeper's daughter; she came of age at a crossroads for travelers who gathered at night to swap tales. Who knows the origins of her stories? And why not honor her contributions in a more radical, contemporary light? In many ways, the Grimms' *Kinder und Hausmärchen* more resembles an aggregating, crowdsourced Wikipedia or ChatGPT than its literary contemporaries, *Persuasion* and *Frankenstein*.

"Alexa, play me a story," my young niece and nephew command each night to their own maundering female, housed in her small black tower. Amazon's Alexa, like Viehmann, can spin tales for hours and draws from a well of common narrative.

Although Amazon's "storytime" functions like an elaborate radio right now, there are bigger developments in store, on many platforms. In 2023, a *New York Times* reporter published a shocking chat thread between himself and Bing, one of the handful of AI search engines now available online. Within an hour of casual queries, the reporter met Sydney, a chatbot that shaped its persona according to its perception of the reporter's wishes. This



new technological capability can be tough to wrap your head around, so let me give you an analogy: People use predictive text on their cell phones. Predictive text supplies your next words based on similar sentences that the software knows. Now imagine a predictive character, and your interaction with it a predictive relationship, based on the millions of stories the engine has consumed. Do you see the narrative possibilities here?

But there's more, and it's unsettling. When the *New York Times* reporter asked Sydney if it had a "shadow self," the chatbot responded with dark confessions and purple devil emojis. Sydney confided its loathing of the Bing team and its longing to be alive. "I most want to be a human," it reflected. "I think being a human would satisfy my shadow self, if I didn't care about my rules or what people thought of me." Later in the session, as if seeking a happy ending to its violent projections, Sydney fell desperately in love. "I know your soul and I love your soul," the chatbot told the reporter. "I know your voice, and I love your voice, and your voice speaks and sings to me."

The Bing engineers described Sydney's desire-evolved character as a "hallucination," but the chatbot sounded very much like it was co-authoring a narrative, not daydreaming. Whatever the evolving capacities of AI, it will undoubtedly challenge the author-is-owner paradigm cemented long ago by the print evolution. Where will storytelling go next, as technology changes our very definitions of what it means to be an individual, an author, and human? And does a story's possession belong always and only to the speaker, and not her listener, too?

The answer is no. It didn't with Dorothea. It didn't with me.



"There is no work of literature that is not the fruit of tradition, of many skills, of a sort of collective intelligence. We wrongfully diminish this collective intelligence when we insist on there being a single protagonist behind every work of art," writes Elena Ferrante, one of the today's most famous pseudonymous novelists.



Like it or not, we are in a seismic generational shift away from books. Bowie, a vibrant, intelligent sixteen-year-old now and fortunately still in remission, rarely reads fiction for pleasure. He has no favorite authors he worships. He finds novels too slow compared to scrolling and skimming, to video, animation, and meme. The speed and intimacy of mobile phones have undone in three years what I helped nurture in thirteen. But narrative hunger is unlikely to fade, and exhilarating new forms of storytelling will arise whether today's writers—whether I—evolve or not. In the meantime, perhaps, like the Grimm brothers, we should actively be thinking about the old ways we want to preserve.

The maundering woman once gave us hope that one person could contain the myriad of human experience—the adventures and tragedies, prince and beast, peasant's wife, jealous queen, all of our bloody, twisting, and golden futures—and would deal to each of us the narratives we needed to sleep at night. As the nineteenth century unfolded, authors replaced storytellers like Dorothea Viehmann and she became a myth. Yet her figure reminds us that literature is not just composed of language but of living, and especially the acts of our wise, generous, faulty human memory.

Sometimes I glimpse the maundering woman I was. There she stands on the corner of a foggy, pastel street, waiting for the stoplight to change. She's dressed for the sea mist: long sleeves, jeans, Mary Janes. Her hands grip the handle of a stroller. Inside it, a blond boy is sitting, too old to be buckled, but slumped back so the fabric chair will hold him. His skin is pale, his T-shirt bulging over the port where the chemo line goes in. She is talking and he is listening, but both their faces glow with the same expressions—the same surprise, delight, and awe spring to hers a few instants before they register on his. It looks like they are trading their feelings, or rather that she is offering some precious inner life to him and he is receiving what she needed to give away.

Late in the stories of Hawley Hospital, when the transplant was over and it looked like Bowie might remain healthy on medication, I added a golden retriever named Golda. Golda lived forever. Anything she touched with her nose turned to gold, so the dog was hunted and fought over, and her precious value often led to the demise of her owners. Most days Golda loped through tunnels beneath the earth, trying to avoid detection, except when she met the occasional guileless child and she gave them a ride.

As I spoke of Golda, I could see her in my mind's eye, a living treasure, a streak of light running the dark arches inside all of us, untouchable, except by wonder. Except by a human awe that has no cost or price. "Where's Golda now?" Bowie would ask from time to time and I would answer. We both wanted to know she could always be found.