

*The Three Dark Kings (Die Drei Dunklen Könige)*  
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He groped through the dark suburb. The houses stood broken off against the sky. The moon was missing, and the pavement was shocked by the late steps. Then he found an old plank. He pushed his foot against it until a brittle piece sighed and broke loose. The wood smelled moldy and sweet. Through the dark suburb he groped back. There were no stars to be seen.

When the door opened (it cried in doing so, the door), the pale-blue eyes of his wife looked toward him. They came from a tired face. Her breath hung white in the room; it was so cold. He bent his bony knee and broke the wood. The wood sighed. Then it smelled moldy and sweet all around. He held a piece of the wood under his nose. Smells almost like cake, he laughed quietly. Don't, said his wife's eyes, don't laugh. He's sleeping.

The man placed the sweet, moldy wood into the small tin stove. It flared up and threw a handful of warm light throughout the room. It fell brightly on a tiny round face and remained for an instant. The face was just one hour old, but it already had everything that belonged to it: Ears, nose, mouth and eyes. The eyes had to be large, you could tell that, even though they were closed. But the mouth was open, and a soft puffing came from it. Nose and ears were red. He's alive, thought the mother. And the small face slept.

There are still some oat flakes left, said the man. Yes, answered his wife that is good. It is cold. The man took another piece of the sweet soft wood. Now she has had her baby and has to be cold, he thought. But he didn't have anyone, whom he could strike in the face with his fists for it. As he opened the stove door, again a handful of light fell over the sleeping face. The woman said quietly: Look, like a halo, do you see it? Halo! he thought, and he didn't not have anyone whom he could strike in the face with his fists.

Then there were people at the door. We saw the light, they said, from the window. We want to sit down for ten minutes. But we have a child, said the man to them. They said nothing more, but nevertheless came into the room, blew steam from their noses and raised their feet high. Then the light fell on them.

There were three of them. In three old uniforms. One had a cardboard box, one a bag. And the third didn't have any hands. Frozen, he said, and held the stumps high. Then he

turned his coat pocket toward the man. Tobacco was in it and thin paper. They rolled cigarettes. But the woman said: Don't smoke, the child.

Then the four went to the door and their cigarettes were four points in the night. One had thick wrapped feet. He took a piece wood from a bag. A donkey, he said, I carved on it for seven months. For the child. He said that and gave it to the man. What's wrong with your feet? the man asked. Water, said the donkey carver, from hunger. And the other one, the third one? the man asked as felt the donkey in the dark. The third one was trembling in his uniform: Oh, nothing, he whispered, it's only nerves. We've just experienced too much fear. Then they stamped step out their cigarettes and went in again.

They raised their feet high and looked at the small sleeping face. The one who was trembling took two yellow bonbons from his cardboard box and said: They are for the woman.

The woman opened her pale blue eyes widely, when she saw the three-dark ones bent over the child. She was afraid. But then the child pushed his legs against her chest and screamed so powerfully that the three-dark ones lifted their feet and shuffled to the door. Here they nodded again, and then they climbed into the night.

The man followed them with his eyes. Strange saints, he said to his wife. Then he closed the door. They are beautiful saints; he mumbled tended to the oat flakes. But he had no face for his fists.

But the child screamed, whispered the woman, he screamed uite loudly. Then they left. Look, how lively he is, she said proudly. The face opened its mouth and screamed.

Is he crying? the man asked.

No, I think, he's laughing, the woman answered.

Almost like cake, the man said as he smelled the wood, like cake. Quite sweet.

It's also Christmas today, said the woman.

Yes, Christmas, he mumbled, and from the stove a handful of light fell brightly onto the small sleeping face.

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