

## Finding Mathilde

Lauren Butterworth

I had almost given up trying to find her. Mathilde, a woman I was only just beginning to know. I'd hunted for days, seeking footprints between gold-leafed vines, in tumbling village alleyways, even in the dark and trembling forest. I'd catch a whiff of her in a courtyard, a glimpse of hair disappearing beneath an archway, and I'd scurry. But I was chasing a spectre, elusive not only because she was immaterial, like an ordinary ghost, but because she was fictional. A woman plucked from wherever it is that fictional women come from, waiting to reveal herself to me as someone who could, in time, seem tangible. In the strange way that characters we create can emerge fully formed and yet entirely apart from us, she had manifested and become, at once, a mystery. But I knew that she was from here, this tiny village at the foot of the Vosges Mountains, 15,000 kilometres from my Australian home, and belonged to a history some four-hundred years before my own.

I'd arrived in Bergheim, a fortified town in the middle of the Alsatian wine-region, via train from Luxembourg. Watching fields pass in patterns of green, I thought back on the month that had passed. A series of coaches from Krakow through the Baltics, budget hostels and free walking tours, old town pub crawls and boys on dance floors. It was an experience entirely removed from the one I spent that train journey preparing myself for, but they'd arisen from the same need. I was coming out of a crucial turning point in both my PhD and my personal life. I'd left my fiancé a year before and recovered myself in a hectic Mediterranean summer, and very soon afterwards Mathilde had appeared. She was a newcomer to a novel I thought I knew, and she surprised me with the urgency with which she demanded her place on the page. The problem was that her birth necessitated not only the death of another, a character I disliked and had been stuck on for a year, but an entire setting, a timeline, a third of the manuscript. But she had her claws in, and so after weeks of indulging myself in the kind of travel that had once made me whole again, I had arrived to discover a history of witches. Though I knew little else, I knew Mathilde would be one of them: a wise-woman, a healer, a terror.

Bergheim was one of a cluster of villages at the centre of a century-long spate of witch trials. Though most took place formally in Strasburg, a small city close by on the Rhine, I wanted my witch to be in the forest. The Vosges Mountains creep close to the villages, and I could picture a little cottage for her just beyond the town wall, a goat and a patch of herbs, secluded in the secrecy of the woodland. I'd spent months with my nose buried in old 1970s volumes of European witchcraft, learning the causes of hysteria, the manner of the trials, the cruel and torturous punishments. I'd read testimonies and religious tracts, the infamous *Malleus Malificarum*, the Hammer of Witches, which outlined, in shocking misogyny, the conservative zeitgeist of the period. But it was difficult to translate those facts into fiction, especially from a library in Adelaide. I needed something more tangible, to write from *her* home. To smell the dew in early mornings, watch the angle of sunlight on yellow cornfields, and hear the call of ravens, their rustle as they soared from fence post to sky.

Google Images had revealed the region to resemble a fairy-tale: gabled, half-timbered houses with flower boxes and Hansi prints in the windows, winding cobblestone streets and rusting water pumps hidden in courtyards. All before a backdrop of mountains, vines curving like bellies from one church steeple to the next, and three castles perched on the hillside, threatening at any

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moment to topple and fall. I pictured myself biking from village to village, notebook and cheese baguette in hand, sitting on grassy hills and in alfresco cafes, the words flowing like honey. How could they not? It was all so beautiful. Picture perfect. A postcard. And yet, a week had passed. Days of frustrated scribbles and bare impressions, but nothing of plot, nothing of character, just musings about the crows, the way the apples I'd picked from an orchard down a country lane crunched, as did the almost ripe grapes from the bunch I'd stolen from the vines. Mathilde would be a scavenger too, lurking in the outskirts, the village walls high around her, stealing into shadows. I had taken to observing, from the outskirts, while nibbling at my baguette and cheese, hordes of middle-aged tourists swanning from cellar door to cellar door, eating their tarte-flambé and quiche Lorraine; I'd never felt like this kind of outsider in my travels. It was nothing like traipsing through Eastern Bloc capitals. There I strode with the confidence of the bohemian-solo-white-woman-backpacker, and my kind was not unknown among the locals. I was one of hundreds of young people finding themselves through successions of empowering clichés, and while I was self-aware enough to understand the trope I fell into, it was also one that gave me agency, an identity.

When I'd arrived in Bergheim, my host had met me at the station. The local bus came only twice a day, and my plan to hire a bike was quickly abandoned by the reality of my 70-litre rucksack and the incline of the hills. She'd offered to drive me to the Airbnb flat I had rented for the week, a rare luxury I was looking forward to after weeks of hostels. She spoke barely a word of English, and my high school French squeaked with years of rust, so we spoke in a broken bilingual jumble. At the flat, a loft above their garage with checked curtains and a ceiling cross-hatched with thick wooden beams, she introduced me to Christophe, her husband. They were polite, but restrained. They seemed confused by me, a solo woman with a flag-patched backpack and vague explanations as to my purpose: '*Je veux faire des recherches. J'écris.*' I caught their sideways glances, their exchanged shrugs. They were used to regional grey-nomads arriving in cars like beetles, not budget-conscious young writers. It made me nervous. I was out of my depth.

Nonetheless, Christophe lent me a lumbering old mountain bike, and I rode out beyond the village, down a narrow lane and into the rolling green countryside. But the freedom of it proved an illusion. The route I'd planned was far too strenuous for my legs, accustomed to flat Adelaide plains. After just a few kilometres, I was huffing, straining against the incline. I tried not to let it bother me. I'd restrict myself to the closest villages, they were the most important, after all. It was more realistic that way: Mathilde wouldn't be able to get very far either. When I arrived in the next village, I realised I didn't have a bike lock. Forced to stick to the streets, I looked instead through windows of candied buildings into stores selling heart shaped gingerbread and homemade berry jams. An intriguing toy-shop was filled with little marionette witches on brooms, but I could only stand outside and peer. As I looked, the bike fell against my shin, shredding a layer of skin so I bled as I walked. With oil-stains on my bare legs, and hair matted to my face, I passed fancy hotels and bed and breakfasts, converted from grand old houses. I felt eyes on me as I passed: I was bedraggled, sweaty, and thirty years younger than everybody else. It wasn't quite the writer's retreat I'd imagined. When the following days brought more of the same, I began to panic. I'd collected pages of scribbled impressions, descriptions of each village, the wildlife, the smells and sounds. But so far there was nothing of Mathilde. And without her, there was no novel.

But there was one last hope, a museum, *La Maison des Sorcières* – the Witches' House – dedicated to uncovering the dark history of the trials. However, it was the low-season, October, and so it was only open once a week: Tuesdays. I left on Wednesday. It was down a short,

flower-boxed lane in a large stone house with a wrought-iron silhouette of a long-nosed, pointy-hatted witch on a broom. Around the corner there was a witch's garden, a square patch of green with poisonous herbs: mandrake, monkhood, belladonna. I lingered before entering, unsure of what I'd find. Perhaps I would catch a glimpse of Mathilde reflected in the tale of a real woman; the details of crimes and arrests, the superstition and mythology would unravel that thread I knew to be sticking out in my mind, just a little, waiting to be pulled.

Inside, a man in black took my meagre student offering and handed me a card.

'The displays are not in English,' he said, sensing from my stilted introduction that I was not from here.

'*C'est bon.*' I asserted, offering him my most confident smile, and rounded the corner into the exhibition.

In the period immediately before the Thirty Years War, Bergheim and the surrounding villages suffered from an onslaught of hardships. Plagues led to fallow lands, devastating crops and famine. Then there was the rinderpest, an infectious cattle disease that wiped-out herds, and with them, livelihoods. In the 1630s, barely recovered, the region was ravaged by the Swedish army. I couldn't help but imagine the terror of soldiers billeted in farmhouses, of losing dwindling supplies to looting and requisition, not to mention the horror of sieges, of men in cracked armour posted at the gates. Research taught me that such conditions, a fatal mixture of fear and superstition, make a region ripe for a craze. Position such villages in a borderland, where town after town is converting to the new faith of Luther and Calvin, and you have a powder keg.

Among walls of black, a board, illuminated by three small spotlights, sparked my curiosity. I could make out rows of blurred dashes, but I kept on track, reading about the ecclesiastic courts, the manner of the trials, the role of the bailiffs, the justices, the civil judiciary. I snapped pictures, I squinted and drew contextual conclusions from unknown words. I grew closer. The dashes revealed themselves. They were names. Rows and rows of them. I stood stock-still.

Marguerite Möwel, the first condemned, went to trial on May 29, 1582. Barbara Pforzel, wife of Claus, a winemaker, was judged 28 June, 1586, along with Anna Weckhenzipfel of nearby Rodern. Barbara Wagner, three times married, and Catharina Flöss, Veronika Ziegler and Margaretha Schaffer, tried 9 August, 1586. Anna Kessler died in prison that same year, as did Madeleine Meyer, a century later, but not before Ursule Kosh and Christine Schwenck, Catherine and Barbara, Agnes, another Barbara, Christine, Maria, Agathe, Madeleine, Anna Pferzel and Anna Aichmann, Margaretha, and Veronika and on and on and on. A century of death. My feet became solid. I couldn't move. I thought of the horrors of Holocaust museums I'd visited in Germany and Poland. How they'd taught me the significance of a name, the grief of a frayed teddy bear on a pedestal, and the way a pair of spectacles in a glass cabinet can make you tremble.

I left the museum with a headache. It was probably the result of three hard hours of translation, but I felt as though I carried the world. The village was quiet now. It was late afternoon and the few small shops were closing. There was no traffic, only the occasional car squeezed between a bollard and a plant-box. Overhead, ravens cawed against the purpling sky, circling the church spire. I walked towards them as though in a trance and found myself by the town wall beside the church. I climbed onto the ramparts, walking slowly. I hadn't found her yet, but I was getting closer. Something, certainly, had shifted.

As I wandered, I peered down into yards. The gardens burst with autumn: pumpkins strained the vines, capsicums twisted and apples rotted beneath trees. There were chickens in wiry coops, dog's bowls and lawn chairs. They seemed strange against the backs of medieval structures,

which, from behind, without the flowery pastels, recalled far more their original façades. I stopped and stared, blurring out the children's toys and patio furniture. I could almost see stacks of firewood, hear the rough sawing of men at workbenches, and inhale the fermenting stench of wine in barrels. Ahead loomed the tower, topped by a round, bristly stork's nest. The region is famous for them, though I was yet to see any. Instead, more ravens flocked. Witches' birds.

As I approached the tower, that heaviness came down quickly. A gold and black plaque on the brick read *Hexenturm: The Witches Tower*. Hawthorn vines strangled the crevices of the brick, slithered into the windows. Nobody was around. No echoing murmurs or footsteps. Only the sound of my own breath. I grasped a handful of vine and yanked, releasing a strand and unveiling what was hidden in the dark. Piles of stones, old planks of wood, the glint of a metal soda can, torn newspaper and cigarette butts. On the ceiling, evidence of the *strappado*, an instrument that suspends a victim by the wrists, hung from the ceiling. Then, beneath it all, the barely visible crosshatched metal of the *oubliette*. In a pit four meters deep, women were kept for crimes as simple as arguing with their husbands. I tried to imagine her there. A tall woman, frayed and skinny, dirty hair covering her face. Bruised, shackled and limp-legged on the floor. She appeared like a ghost and disappeared in a blink.

I looked back along the rampart walls to the little houses all in rows, and their cookie-cutter allure crumbled. I couldn't believe they'd ever looked delightful. The region's economy relies on a façade built on an image of provincial charm, one that celebrates its medieval history as pastoral idyll. But there is a darkness here. The Witches' Tower, *La Maison des Sorcières*, the iron-wrought women on brooms above doorways, the little toy witches dangling from porches play just as much a role in this medieval tourist trap as the home-made jams and gingerbread men. No matter what the image of the witch may have come to represent to our modern consciousness – a victim, a hag, a woman dangerous in her empowerment – here, in these villages, it's not a mythology. It's history. Mathilde may not be real, but Barbara Pforzler, Anna Aichmann, and Veronika Ziegler were. And they weren't witches. They were women.

Back at the flat, I poured myself a supermarket riesling and sat down with my journal. I hadn't meant to, but I began to drift, not into sleep, but something like it. In a daydream as vivid as any I'd ever had, I see that long, narrow street in Riquewihr, Mathilde reaching desperately between the wooden beams of a cart. Straw is beneath her knees, stinking of urine, a woman – her sister? – lies collapsed on the cobblestones behind her. She runs again and falls, chest wracked with heart-thump, with mucus, and she lets out an animal howl. Villagers stand by doorways, whispering and hissing as children pelt rot at the cart. I can taste the salt on her lips, feel the dead weight of her legs. The tower looms. The final stop. She will never see any of this again. Nothing but the cracks in stone walls and, perhaps, the rolling vines from her high place on the hill as she awaits the fire to be lit.

In the morning, my last day before leaving for Strasburg, I decided to forego the bike for my feet. Clouds were sunken and low, the lane wet from overnight rain. The air was dense with it, humid and prickly, and fog obscured the peaks of the mountains. I walked along the road to Ribeauville past fields with goats tethered to poles, apple orchards, and purpling vines. In town, it was surprisingly quiet. The grey light robbed the buildings of their vibrancy, and brown leaked into the puddles in troughs and between the cobblestones.

Just beyond Ribeauville, the town met the forest. The air grew colder, fresher as I strode. I passed a pair of sheep that grunted curiously. Ravens flocked from an old fence post and carved across the sky, and as I climbed, heading further into the forest, the mountain, I thought I caught a glimpse of blonde hair. I could hear thumping in the undergrowth, like footsteps, and though it frightened me at first, my skin soon pricked with exhilaration. The church bells rang and I

jumped, the bristle of sharp leaves scratched my ankles. In the stillness that followed, I listened only to the wood. The crackle of wind in the leaves, the distant purr of cars, that thumping, again and again – little acorns, I realised, falling from the trees. A cacophony of mosquito hum and bird song. I sat on a log amongst glittering moss and a turquoise bug, bright and shining, landed on my knee. I felt the stillness of the forest, but I also felt its life.

And so would she. Mathilde would know this place and it would sustain her. Because she, like me, was powerful in her solitude. Mud-spatter on her legs, hair matted to her face, she'd pass fancy houses and merchant stalls and feel the eyes of the villagers on her. But it wouldn't bother her, being on the outside; it wouldn't bother her to look through windows at pastries she couldn't afford while she munched on a husk of bread. I smiled as I felt the forest fill me up. Perhaps I knew Mathilde better than I thought.

It was, after all, no accident that a wild woman, a witch nurtured by the earth, unbridled in her passion and unafraid of her independence, emerged at the same time I chose to reject the marriage and mortgage I'd been unconsciously hurtling toward. And I was lucky, because I could invoke a fictional woman as my muse, not only for the manuscript, but as symbol of the woman I wanted to be, because I could take her strength, her power, and leave behind the realities of a life like hers. Though the patriarchal structures that limited women like Mathilde still exist, embedded in the unconscious of girls like me, I will never face a death in flames for choosing to reject them.

On the walk back to town, I was filled with something I could hardly explain. The sun itself seemed to sense it, breaking through cloud to dry the mud on the paths. I stopped by a pastry shop for a strawberry tart. Just down the road hung the sign that had intrigued me days before. 'Legend des Sorcières' it read, Legend of the Witches. I didn't know how I felt about the store. Not now that I'd seen past the veneer of those cookie-cutter villages. Was it more tourist-money made on the backs of tortured women? My throat constricted. But it was my last day, no harm in peeking inside.

It was a jungle of swinging marionettes, bright little women in hats, dimple cheeked, astride their brooms.

'They're for luck,' said the woman at the counter. 'Hang them by your door, your window. They bring blessings to the home.'

Blessings, I thought. That's not so bad. They were all different sizes, each in a single colour – purple, green, blue or red – with their own unique little nametag. I ran my fingers between them, watching them twist and dance on their wooden brooms. And then I saw her. A tiny creature, the size of my hand, all in green. I reached for her. Her nametag read, 'La Mathilde.'

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