

The Old Witch's House

Generations of townsfolk had avoided the spooky house at the end of the long drive, where the shutters were always closed against the sun and the rain, where the chimney stack smoked even in ninety degree heat and the rocking chair creaked on the rotting veranda though no-one ever sat in it. "A witch lives there," the children would say and even the bravest dare-devil drew well short of the veranda steps. Every year on Hallowe'en the porch lights would be turned on and the ghoulis faces of meticulously carved pumpkins would glow from within whilst apples bobbed in a barrel out front. The kids were definitely not going there on Hallowe'en, "What when her powers are at their greatest?" even though it looked far more inviting than at any other time of the year. Parents and children would walk past the end of the drive with hurried steps and throw only the briefest of glances along the drive.

One day the postman, the only person brave enough to reach the post box that stood rusting on its pole some six feet from the veranda, found the old lady dead on the steps from a broken neck, a broom loosely clasped in her hands. "Crash landing," was the general consensus of the townsfolk, "Accidental death. A broken neck sustained presumably from falling down the steps whilst sweeping" was the rather more mundane verdict of the Coroner.

A pretty woman, blonde with hazel eyes, beautifully long, well-manicured hands and a figure to die for, bought the house. She painted it, fixed the rotting veranda and replaced the creaking chair with a modern chair that hung from the veranda's new rafters and twisted and turned playfully in the breeze. She took down the rusting post box and put a new one, shiny black, at the end of the drive. "So the postman doesn't have to trek the length of the drive, how considerate," was the opinion of the townsfolk, and they smiled and chatted to her on her regular visits to the town's stores.

As the town prepared for another Hallowe'en, with shop windows displaying costumes ranging from Frankenstein to Freddy and the only fruit and veg that the grocer seemed to stock were apples and pumpkins, a decision was reached. Reached without discussion, just an unspoken, mutual agreement that this year they would all visit the old witch's house, the blonde woman would not be shunned but welcomed with open arms, and hopefully she would provide lots of goodies and a surprise or two. When the grocer reported selling the blonde several pumpkins and the newsagent confirmed the sale of four of the largest bags of mixed sweets and tens of party bags excitement grew in the townsfolk.

Their breath formed clouds as group by group they shuffled round the town, ghosts and ghouls, witches and warlocks, tiny little pumpkins and huge great evil trees. The evening dew was forming into frost on the tips of the leaves as the first group stood at the end of the long drive, plastic

pumpkin lanterns casting shadows across the gravel. Real pumpkins with steady flames behind triangular eyes lined each side of the drive. Candles and lanterns threw surprisingly brilliant light across the veranda and a witch on a broom flew in circles in the space outside the front door. "That's probably how the old witch died, when her string broke." They all giggled and sniggered, parents and children alike, as they made their way towards the house. The door flew open, welcomingly wide, as the blonde stood in a pointed black hat, a long black dress and cloak, clutching party bags of treats. On the table behind her a large pot sat, surrounded by glasses. "Mulled wine for the suffering parents," she smiled as she spoke, revealing some blacked out teeth.

"You have gone to some effort," a father said as he sipped the blonde's wine and tried to manoeuvre her away from the crowd and his wife. The blonde smiled, adroitly turned to the pot of steaming wine in which plastic bats and frog's legs floated, and poured a cup to newly arrived guests, "Ah, but I love Hallowe'en, don't you?"

As the parents mingled in the hallway warmed by spicy wine and the blonde's infectious enthusiasm for her new home, the children ran about the house playing hide and seek, exploring the nooks and crannies of the old witch's house that they would never have dared visit before. Some of the little pumpkins fell asleep on the deep soft sofa worn out by the excitement of it all, little orange balls with skinny arms and legs attached, as their parents had the best Hallowe'en in years, enjoying each other's company, relaxed by the wine and their perfect hostess.

Little Molly, a fairy, and her older brother Jasper stood at the end of the drive, hand-in-hand. "Should we go up there?" Molly whispered to Jasper as the sound of overly jovial adult voices drifted down the drive. "No," said Jasper gripping his sister's hand more tightly, "I can only hear adults and I think they're drinking." He looked at his watch that glowed yellow in the streetlight. "It's nine o'clock. It's probably OK to go home now, but be quiet and straight upstairs no matter what. OK?" Molly nodded and they headed back to their home in the hope that Pa would be passed out. Molly clutched her treat bags tightly, her fifty cent wand, already two years old and held together with sticking tape, peeking out of the top of the biggest. She wished they could have gone in, they always seemed to miss out on the fun, but she knew that Jasper would be right. He always was.

The mulled wine never seemed to run out and the parents took full advantage of their host's generosity. As they wound their way home they all commented on how wonderful the blonde had been; such a fantastic host. It was only in the morning, as they stumbled to breakfast tables or stood under pummelling showers that they realised. Doors to bedrooms and play dens were flung open, names were called up and down the streets and then they ran. Ran towards the long drive, past the shiny new post box, past the empty pumpkin heads where flames no longer burned and up the recently carpentered veranda stairs and through the open front door. They ran through the house calling their children's names, checking nooks and crannies, opening wardrobe doors, ripping the cellar apart.

Molly and Jasper stood at the end of the drive, hand-in-hand. Jasper bore the livid marks caused by his father's fists on his arms and cheek. A wailing mother spotted them, "Where are the others? Where are my babies?" Molly and Jake stood petrified. "Where are the other children? Why are you still here?" Jasper winced as she took him by the arms, shook him, screamed in his face, "Why are you still here?" "We didn't go in," he whispered. And the mother sank to the floor and sobbed as the only two children left in the town of Hamlin shivered beneath their too thin jumpers in the November wind.