



The Raggedy Witches

The moon was strange the night the witches came and Auntie died. The colour of brass and huge, it seemed to fill the sky. It stared down at the car as Mam drove in and out of dark country valleys, and blotted the stars with its milky light.

Mup didn't like it. She wanted to tell Mam that. She wanted to start a conversation, but Mam was different tonight too. Like the moon, Mam was strange. Usually they would sing as Mam drove back from the hospital: songs from the radio, songs from their heads. Or they would talk and make up stories and Mam would explain things. (*What are the stars, Mam? They're burning planets, like our sun, only so distant that their light is cold and glittering.*) But tonight the radio was mute and so was Mam, and Mup sat in a tense bubble

of silence under the glaring moon, her head buzzing with questions that Mam was not willing to answer.

Mup looked across at her little brother, Tipper. He was fast asleep, his hands curled on his knees, his small mouth open and drooling onto the straps of his car seat. Tipper wasn't much use for conversation, but it would have been nice had he been awake. He could have laughed at the moon, maybe, and – by being so small – he might have made Mup feel big. Gently, Mup reached across and covered Tipper with the car blanket. He went on sleeping, and she rested her head against the window and watched the night flow by.

A car passed, its full beams making Mam curse, and Mup shut her eyes against the glare. For a long time she didn't open them again. She must have fallen asleep without knowing because she was enjoying a lovely dream about warm Swiss roll and custard when the car bumped, and she woke up.

Outside, the night was still streaming past. Mup had slumped against the door with her face tilted to the sky, and she was looking up through the branches of the roadside trees. The trees were falling away and falling away as the car sped by, and there were witches in the branches, and they were following the car.

Mup wasn't startled – half asleep as she was, with the taste of warm custard in her mouth – but she frowned up at the witches with an inkling that something wasn't right. Gradually, the cold of the window stole into her sleepy brain and the thrum of the engine made itself real. All the little squeaks and rattles of a car in motion became solid around her, and as the dream calm slipped away, Mup was filled with the knowledge that she was awake, and there were witches in the trees, following the car.

There were men witches and women witches, and they leapt from branch to branch, racing along at tremendous speed. They were nothing but shadows among shadows, so that Mup had to strain her eyes to see them. She watched for so long that she began to fall asleep again, half convinced she was dreaming after all. Then one of the witches jumped the gap between two trunks, her silhouette dark against the fine grey of the sky. She descended in a falling arc, her clothes blown back like ragged black wings. As her pale hands reached for the branches of the next tree, she looked down into the car and met Mup's eyes.

Mup sat up straight, suddenly afraid.

The witch's face was a pale, bright oval, her black eyes expressionless. She tilted her head in

contemplation of the little creature before her, and all the world slowed to the space between heartbeats. For an endless moment, the witch's gaze filled the night, pressing Mup down and down until she felt small and useless and insignificant. Then the witch was gone.

Mup's heart resumed beating. She breathed deep. She jerked forward, craning to see out the window. The witch had passed into the next tree, her clothes fluttering behind her. Travelling hand over hand through the branches, effortlessly pacing the car, she didn't bother to look down again and neither did her shadowy brothers and sisters.

Mup glanced at Mam, grim-faced and hunched over the steering wheel.

Aunty had said that if Mup ever saw witches, she was to tell. "It doesn't matter what they might want," Aunty had said, holding a hand up to silence Mup's questions. "All you need to know is that if you see one, you are to tell me. But only tell me – you hear? – your mother and father don't need to know."

Mup looked back up into the trees. When Aunty told you to do something, you did it. You did it properly. But Mup had never expected the witches to be so scary. She had always thought Aunty would be

here when they arrived.

Was she really not allowed to tell Mam?

All through the journey home, the witches tracked the car, and Mup tracked the witches. Sometimes she'd see them cross the gaps between trees – one, two, three, four, five, six of them – their billowing clothes and pale features sharp against the sky. But mostly they raced through the shadows, hard to see, harder still to believe in.

Abruptly, the trees ended and Mup found herself gazing into empty stars. She knelt up, twisting against her seat belt, and looked behind as the trees diminished in the distance. There was no sign of the witches.

Mam turned the car and the headlights splashed the front of their house, illuminating the flower beds, the bushes, the big chestnut trees. Mup stayed kneeling, staring out the back window while Mam opened the hall door and returned to take Tipper from his car seat.

“Come on, Mup,” Mam said, hefting Tipper's sleeping weight onto her shoulder.

Mup hesitated. A storm had risen, and the garden was alive with sound. The chestnut trees churned like the sea, their leaves tumbling into the fan of

light which spilled from the hall door. Mam's hair whipped around her tired face, slipping into her mouth and getting in her eyes.

"Mup!" she cried impatiently.

Mup took a deep breath and dived from the car. The night was a frenzy around her, and she ran as fast as she could across the yielding lawn. Hurry, Mam, she thought, Hurry! Behind her, Mam slammed the car door and slowly crunched her way up the gravel drive. Over the noise of the storm, through the churning of the trees, came a heavy fluttering sound, like cloth in the wind. Then Mup was in the orange warmth of the hall, and Mam was on her heels slamming the door shut and shaking the storm from her hair.

The house was warm. It was quiet and it was sane. It sealed the horrible night outside.

Mam sighed as she passed up the corridor. "Get your jammies on. I'll make supper in a minute."

"Mam," called Mup, wanting – despite what Auntie had said – to tell her about the witches.

"Shush. Don't wake Tipper." Mam had already turned the corner into Tipper's room, and there was a quiet click from within as she switched his nightlight on. Sensible light added itself to the familiar hallway,

and Mup fell silent, feeling unsure.

But I did see them, she thought. I wasn't dreaming ... was I?

Badger came nudging out of the kitchen, his big flat head pushing the door to one side. He grinned his doggy grin, whining with joy, his butt wagging as fast as his tail.

"Hey, boy," whispered Mup. "Hey." Her old friend thumped his tail against the walls and lumbered his head up under Mup's arm, snuffing the interesting journey smells from her hands and coat, licking her face so she had to push his slobbery kisses away. She laughed, despite herself. "Did you miss me?"

But already Badger was looking past her at the front door, and the hairs on his neck were stiff under her fingers. A low growl rumbled in his chest.

Mup turned to see. It was just the front door, solid and strong as ever. The two long glass panels on either side reflected Mup and Badger back at themselves: an old black Labrador going grey at the muzzle and a dark-eyed girl dressed in a bright red jacket. Both had anxious expressions, both were watching the door. The wind moaned and rattled the letter box. It battered the sturdy wood and hissed against its fragile glass. Mup hugged her arms

protectively around Badger's neck and wondered if Mam had turned the key in the lock.

"You'll never guess," she whispered in Badger's ear, "what I saw in the trees."

The phone rang, and they both leapt, hearts hammering.

It rang again. Its shrill call slicing the air.

"Mup!" called Mam. "Answer the phone."

Mup looked back at the front door. The wind was pounding at it now. The dark outside pressed itself against the glass.

"Mup!" called Mam. "The phone!"

Mup edged backwards, her arm around Badger's neck. Without taking her eyes from the thumping door, she picked up the phone. "Hello, Dad," she said.

Dad's laugh came from far away, thin and hissing. "How do you always know it's me?"

Mup shrugged. Outside, the storm paused suddenly, as if listening to the two of them talk. On the phone table beside Mup there was a photo: Dad's dark face smiling under his yellow helmet, his welder held up in greeting. The orange girders of an oil rig surrounded him, the sky and the sea joined together behind him in a cheerful, seamless blue.

Mup closed her eyes and tried to make a path to Dad in her mind. This was a little trick she had with telephones. Usually it was easy: she would just relax and let her thoughts spin down the line, and there the other person would be standing and smiling as if right next to her. But for some reason Mup couldn't bridge the distance between her and Dad tonight.

She frowned. "Is the sun shining where you are, Dad?"

Dad laughed again. "I'm only in Scotland," he said. "We have the same night and day as you."

"Oh, yes," she said. Sometimes the places Dad lived didn't have the same night and day – sometimes Mup lost track. Her eyes slid to the door again. What if she told Dad about the witches? Would that be OK? Probably not. Aunty never said much to Dad about anything.

"I missed you earlier," Dad said. "Were you up with Aunty Boo?"

"Yes."

"Is Aunty...? How is she?"

"She's not the same. Mam is sad."

There was no noise but the echoey silence of the phone. Then a little sound, like a sigh.

"Dad. I think Aunty Boo might go to heaven."

The phone gaped again for a little while, as though Dad had been swallowed into a big hole. Badger flopped at Mup's feet, his fright forgotten. In the kitchen Mam was filling the kettle and shuffling about and sighing. Badger looked up at Mup with big, listening eyes.

Dad's voice hissed up from far away again. "Mup," he said, and then stopped as though he couldn't finish.

"Mam is very tired, Dad." Mup tried to fit everything into that sentence. The way there were no more songs or conversations. How Mam was so far away, how empty the house felt and how dark the night was, now that Aunty was gone.

"Mupsie," Dad said, his voice humming through cables and lines under the sea, over the land, from him to her, so far, so far. "Your mam loves Aunty Boo so much. She loves her so much. Because ... because..."

"Because Aunty Boo was good to Mam when she was a little girl."

There was a small pause on the line: Dad, far away, deciding what words to use, maybe.

"Yes," he said at last.

"Aunty is like Mam's mam."

“Yes.”

“I wouldn’t want Mam to die, Dad.”

“Well, that’s how your mam feels about Aunty Boo.”

“I don’t want Aunty Boo to die, Dad.”

“No. I don’t either... I’d be there if I could, pet. This bloody storm. It won’t last much longer. Soon as they can, they’ll get a ’copter out and I’ll be home. OK?”

Mup nodded into the phone.

“OK? Mup?”

“OK, Dad.”

“Can I have Mam?”

“OK, Dad.”

“Mup? I love you.”

“I love you too, Dad.”

Mam took the phone and stood talking quietly in the kitchen. She didn’t talk about Aunty Boo; she just asked how Dad was, and kept saying, “Let’s not talk about that now. Let’s not talk about that,” very gently over and over, and, “When can you come home...? But when do they think...? Do they think that it will be soon...? I love you too. I wish you were here... Yes. Yes. I know.”

Mup kept her eyes riveted to the front door as she

backed into her bedroom. To her shock, the too-big moon was peering in at her window. Mup did not like the way it stared at her. Badger seemed unperturbed, though, and he trotted straight past Mup and scuffled around on the rug until he got comfy. Determined to avoid the moonlight, Mup sidled along her bedroom wall until she was close enough to dive into bed. She burrowed deep, so only her eyes showed over the duvet.

I won't sleep until you're gone, she told the watching moon.

The radiator clicked and sang under the window. Badger snored. In the kitchen Mam talked quietly, then fell silent. The house filled with the settlings and sighs of night-time.

The moon moved slowly across Mup's window until it shone straight down onto her bed. Frowning, she withdrew her feet from its milky light. Heavy as sand, the moonlight collected in pearly mounds, thickening and softening and growing warmer until... Oh!

Mup lost her wary frown.

It was only Auntie Boo sitting on the end of her bed! As round and solid as any other night when Mup would wake to find her moving about, putting

clothes into drawers or quietly picking up toys and tidying shelves of books.

In his sleep, Badger sighed a happy sigh. Auntie was here. Everything was OK.

“Hello, Pearl,” said Auntie. She never called Mup anything but Pearl, or Tipper anything but Robert, and she always called Mam Stella, which was Mam’s real name. “Why aren’t you asleep? It’s much too late for children to be awake.”

“I got a fright.”

“Oh.” Auntie sighed. “Well. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. I just came to settle a few things with your mother before I head off.”

“Head off? Head off where?”

Auntie huffed and motioned her hand as if Mup’s question was unimportant.

“You going to heaven?” persisted Mup.

Auntie looked mischievously from the corner of her eye and tucked the covers in around Mup’s feet. “There now,” she said.

All of a sudden, the questions were gone from Mup’s head. All she felt was safe and secure; all she felt was sleepy. Auntie hummed her usual quiet lullaby, and – as always – Mup’s eyes slipped shut. She floated gently on the song. She was almost entirely asleep

before she remembered she had a message for Auntie.

“It wasn’t you that gave me a fright, Auntie,” Mup murmured. “It was...” She searched drowsily for a good name for the creatures that had followed Mam’s car. She smiled. “It was the raggedy witches,” she said.

Auntie’s hand bit down hard on Mup’s foot.

“Ow! Auntie! My foot!”

“What did you just say?”

“I said, ‘Ow! My foot!’”

Something in Auntie’s expression snagged Mup’s attention. She sat up. “It wasn’t you that gave me a fright,” she insisted. “It was the witches.”

“What kind of witches?”

Mup made a face. “Creepy ones,” she said. “They had pale skin and black eyes. They wore raggedy cloaks.”

Auntie’s face crumpled as though she had a pain. “Black eyes?” she whispered. “Pale faces? You ... you saw those kind of witches here, Mup?”

“They were in the trees, following our car.”

Auntie was up from the bed at that and over to the window like a woman half her size. “By grace,” she muttered, scanning the garden outside. “By grace, I’ll be condemned and roasted in a fire before I let that happen!”

Mup flung back the covers and ran to her. “Let what happen?” she cried. “You never told me what they do! Are they bad, Aunty? Are they from Mam’s mam?”

Mup felt a thrill of fear at mentioning Mam’s mam – but Aunty didn’t shush her, as she usually would, or tell her to mind her own business. Aunty just continued scanning the trees as though Mup wasn’t even there. Her face was all cold white plains and sharp edges, her expression hard and furious and icy. She turned to Mup, and her eyes were fierce ovals filled with black.

Mup screamed in fright and stumbled backwards, falling onto her butt. Badger instantly leapt between them, his lip raised, his teeth showing, and Aunty drew back. It seemed to take her a moment to recognize the person crouched on the floor in front of her, but when she did, she softened. “Mup,” she said in apology.

She was just Aunty again, all kindness and concern now, all softness and regret. But Mup had seen her eyes inky black; she had seen the cold, hard face. And here was Badger, gentle, slobbery Badger, hunched between them, his neck hairs bristling, glaring at Aunty with a growl in his chest.

Mup didn’t know what to do, so she just sat there,

her hand on Badger's collar, staring.

Something landed on the roof. Bump. Then came the patter of sure, light footsteps running effortlessly from one side of the roof to the other. Mup leapt to her feet, and the three of them stood, their differences forgotten, their heads cocked to listen, motionlessly watching the ceiling.

The house held its silence against them and gave nothing away.

Then came the unmistakable sound of the back door opening.

Then Mam's voice – Mam's voice – murmured, "Come in." Then silence.

Mup took a step towards her bedroom door. The hall outside was smoky with shadows. Tipper's room, straight across from hers, was a gaping hole, his moon-mouse night-lamp a useless blob of yellow light that only made the dark more solid. If she stepped out there, into the hallway, into the dark, what then? To her right, far up the hall, would be the treacherous front door. To her left, more doors: Mam's door, the sitting-room door, the playroom and, at the very end, the kitchen.

The kitchen, where, flanked by wellington boots and raincoats and dog toys, stood the back door. The back door that led into the moon-watched garden. The

back door which Mam had opened. The back door through which something had just entered their house.

Mam!

Mup ran for the hall. Aunty jerked her back.

“No, Pearl.”

“But Mam is on her own with them!”

“I said no!”

Mup fell silent. There was no arguing with Aunty when she had that expression.

“Go back to bed, Pearl,” Aunty said, quite gently. “I’ll handle this.” She walked around the corner and up the hall, her footsteps fading into the gloom.

Mup waited for the sound of the kitchen door opening. She waited for the screaming or shouting or whispering to begin. She waited and nothing happened. Nothing at all. Aunty had disappeared into the corridor as though the air itself had soaked her up.

“Go back to bed.” That’s what Aunty had told her. “I’ll handle this.” And Aunty knew best. Aunty always knew best. Mup waited, listening. Still the silence went on.

She looked at her bed, so safe and warm. She looked at the hallway, so empty and dark.

She took a deep breath and stepped out her bedroom door.