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opening extract from

Witch Hill

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WITCH HILL

Marcus Sedgwick

Illustrations by the author

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By the Pricking of my Thumbs

Fear gripped my guts like tangled twine. I woke, eyes searching at the darkened window, ears straining for the sound of footsteps outside. But all I could hear was my pounding heart, and I shrank back into bed, still afraid. Still terrified.

I'd never had a nightmare like this before. Not really, not even after the fire. I'd had bad dreams, who doesn't? But you wake up and it's all okay. Now I knew what it was to wake from a deep sleep and still be afraid long after the nightmare is over. I stared into the darkness, not daring to move. It felt as though there wasn't enough air in the room. I struggled, gasping for breath. I just could *not* breathe. It was as if there was something else in the room, using up *my* air.

I wanted someone to tell me it was all right, but I was still too scared to get out of bed. Besides, I didn't fancy waking my aunt in the middle of the night. I'd only been at her house a couple of days – I didn't want to start freaking her out on top of everything else.

I cowered under the bedcovers, trying to stop panicking. I forced myself to move my arm far enough to put the bedside light on. That helped. With the darkness gone I seemed to be able to breathe a little easier.

Then there was a knock at the door. I must have yelped because a voice said something.

"Are you all right?"

I calmed down a bit. I realised that monsters probably don't knock before they eat you, and anyway I recognised the voice. It was Alison, my cousin.

"Come in," I said. I was pleased I hadn't woken my aunt, but Alison was, like her, sort of weird. It wasn't the way she looked . . . I can't really explain – she's older than me; I barely know her. At least, I didn't know her then.

"Are you all right?" she said again. "Jamie?"

"There was . . . I had a bad dream. That's all."

"Sounded quite bad, you were yelling."

Then my aunt stuck her head round the door. I *had* woken her, after all.

"What's going on?"

"It's all right," said Alison. I was grateful to her for taking over.

"I thought someone was being murdered . . . are you mucking about?"

"Mum! He had a nightmare. Go back to bed. I'll see he's okay."

Alison turned back to me. She and my aunt Jane seemed more like sisters to each other, not mother and daughter. Jane sniffed and went back to bed. She was always tired. She had been up late, working in the pub in the village.

"Shall I put the big light on?" Alison asked.

I nodded.

"Want to tell me about it?"

Yes, I thought, I do. Even though, as I said, Alison was a little strange, I wanted to talk to someone about the dream. I didn't want to go back to sleep for a while at least. I didn't even stop to think how odd it was that she was taking any interest in me – in the few days I'd been at the house she'd barely spoken to me. She was always on the phone to her friends, working out how they were going to spend the Easter holidays. I'd guessed there was some boy she was interested in too, and she was trying to get her friends to ask him out for her. It seemed to take up most of her time.

"Go on then," she said.

I didn't think I'd said anything, but she seemed to know I was going to tell her anyway.

"It was awful. I was in bed, just like I . . . am now. I can't explain really, because I was in bed here, but I was outside too."

I looked at Alison, but her face showed nothing. I looked at the bedcovers and went on. I couldn't think how to explain it, but then something became a bit clearer.

"I think . . . I was in bed, but my mind was outside, sort of *exploring*. My body was still here, but my mind was down in the valley somewhere. Then I came up through the village and the wood and onto the hill. The hill above the village. And then . . ."

"Then?"

"It's scary. Sorry."

Alison looked concerned. Genuinely concerned.

"It might help."

"I was up on the hill for a while. I think I was looking for something and then . . . there was a woman. A horrible, scary old woman."

I saw a flicker in Alison's eyes.

"Go on."

"She was really, really old, and all sort of shrivelled up, and . . . she was on the hill somewhere, I think. Somewhere dark . . . I found her. She found me. I don't know, but we . . . *touched*. Once she knew I was there, that was it. Once she knew I existed, there was no way of undoing it. She came for me, here, in my bed. My mind was back here straight away, but it was too late. She knew I was here and she was unstoppable. I could see her through the window; a black thing on the hillside, coming for me. The way she moved was horrible. She was hobbling, but sort of running too. Shambling. And she moved so fast. She was coming over the hill, and I knew she was coming right for me. Nothing would stop her."

I hesitated. I knew I'd been gabbling, and Alison was wrong; talking about it wasn't helping me at all. It was making me scared again.

"Go on," said Alison.

"That's it really."

"But what happened? Did she . . . ?"

"No!" I yelled. I tried to calm down. "I woke up. When I saw her moving like that, coming for me, I tried to get up, but I couldn't. I couldn't move a muscle. It was as though I was paralysed, or something. That's when I lost it and started screaming."

"I heard."

"I'm sorry."

"No, that's all right. Not your fault, is it? Anyway, you feel better now, don't you? Helps to talk about these things."

I nodded, but I didn't feel that much better. I just felt stupid, and though I was still scared, I suddenly wanted her to go.

"Want a drink or anything?"

"Yes," I said, "but I can get it."

"Sure?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm only going downstairs."

I got out of bed to prove it. She seemed to be convinced.

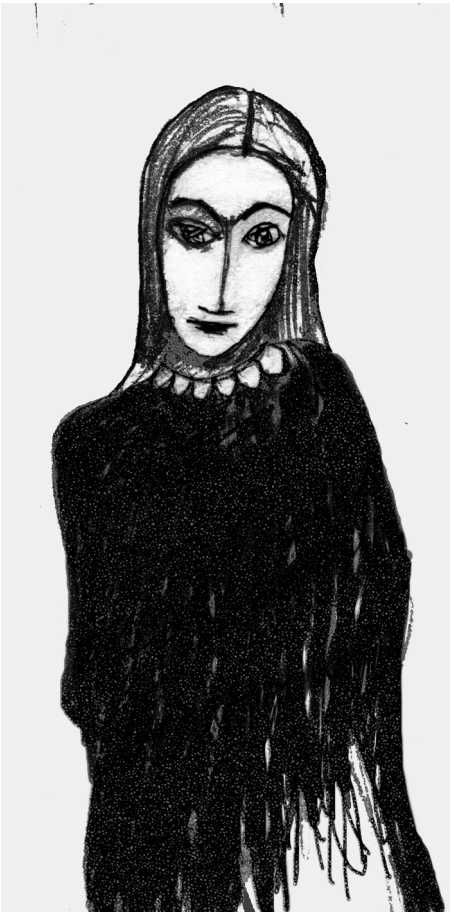
"Well, sleep well. No more dreams. See you." She headed for her room.

"See you in the morning," I said, and started to go down the hall.

As soon as I heard her door close, I turned round and went straight back to bed. I was just about to climb in when I noticed something. The bedroom carpet. There were very faint white footprints on the floor. Wondering who had made them, I knelt down for a closer look. As I did so a disturbing thought began to creep up my neck and into the back of my brain. I knew whose footprints they were. I sat on the bed and pulled my foot right up under the bedside light. I was right. The soles of my feet were covered with white stuff. I felt it with my fingertips.

It was chalk.

First, it is said that she learned this detestable art of witchcraft at the age of twelve, and that she at that time did renounce God and gave of her blood to Sathan.

Then, that she did from this time employ the said detestable art for the conjuration and invocation of evil and wicked spirits for sorcerous purposes for a period of not less than five years.

And, that she did that March exercise her enchantments upon Richard Sedley, of Frog End, Ashbury as revenge for the quarrel between them, and that the said Richard Sedley began to pine and waste and thus he was consumed until his death April second, the year of Our Lord, 1658.